

Who You Gonna Call?

A lack of inter-government agency cooperation is failing to solve everyday problems such as noisy birds and fishball sticks left lying on the ground. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has announced a new government office to deal with this. Insight examines if this is the right fix.

Tham Yuen-C and Rachel Au-Yong
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Thousands of noisy mynahs roost every day in trees outside the Jurong West flat of leasing executive Clement Lim.

Mr Lim has complained to several agencies to get the problem solved - but so far, it has been three years of looking for a permanent solution, and the squawking continues.

One agency, National Parks Board (NParks), did swing into action and pruned several trees near his house, but the mynah nuisance continues and Mr Lim says: "Either get rid of the birds or prune the trees, but if neither happens regularly, then the problem is still there."

The issue of who fixes such problems was put in the spotlight during Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally speech, when he made a now-famous reference to a fishball stick.

Mr Lee cited such a stick, lying along a pathway in Bukit Gombak, to illustrate how the lack of cooperation between government agencies had led to a public area not being cleaned thoroughly.

The example came from Mayor Low Yen Ling, who tells Insight: "Different agencies with different roles may look after a common area with little interaction. Due to the number of parties involved, we spend a fair amount of time and effort coordinating the agencies to get things sorted out."

The anecdote was also among the top three most-read stories on The Straits Times online, following the rally.

During his speech, Mr Lee announced the setting up of a new office under the Ministry of National Development to coordinate eight public agencies - the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA), national water agency PUB, NParks, Housing Board, the Land Transport Authority (LTA), the police, People's Association and the National Environment Agency (NEA) - so they can work in concert to address such issues.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Grace Fu, helped by National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan, will oversee the Municipal Services Office (MSO).

SCALE OF PROBLEM

While it might seem a tad drastic for the top man in the country to devote important speech-time to a stick on the ground, the issue of cross-agency cooperation has plagued citizens and businesses for years. Indeed, even before this latest reference, PM Lee has been

highlighting examples over the years. (See [Cross-agency coordination: Efforts over the years](#))

MPs who spoke to Insight say the problem is not widespread - issues about the lack of inter-agency cooperation figure in less than 10 per cent of the complaints they handle. But such cases can be protracted since they require working out a solution between multiple parties.

Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng, for example, has been trying for the past year to get the NParks and LTA to work with his town council to coordinate grass-cutting schedules, to make sure an open field between the Tampines Expressway and a block of flats - with different tracts managed by the different parties - is trimmed frequently enough to stop mosquitoes breeding.

"Even as an MP, I get bounced around. Imagine (what it is like) for the public. It irritates those who are affected when the problem doesn't get resolved for a long time," he says.

This is especially so since the issues affect the living environment, say MPs. For some MPs, complaints about noise and cleanliness alone make up 10 per cent of the feedback they get. The Ministry of National Development says it will unveil more details on the MSO in the coming weeks.

WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

So why do public agencies have a problem working together?

Over the years, the Government has put in place various policies and schemes to break down the bureaucratic barriers that impede inter-agency cooperation.

The No Wrong Door policy, introduced in 2004, requires civil servants to put a member of the public in touch with the right agency. In cases where the query or feedback applies to several agencies, the agency where the query was first made has to contact all the relevant parties and come up with their responses.

Internally, there are also schemes like Zero In Process, which streamlines the process of resolving cross-agency issues.

The Public Service Division could not reply to queries from Insight by press time.

But according to various ministers who have spoken about public agency service delivery, things have improved.

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, who is also in charge of the civil service, gave front-line agencies and public officers a pat on the back when he said in Parliament in May that they had done "good work in the last two years to improve service delivery and policy responsiveness".

Mr Lee also acknowledged during his National Day Rally speech that some progress has been made, but added that "we have not arrived yet".

MPs agree, and say that more can be done. Jurong GRC MP Ang Wei Neng, for example, feels the No Wrong Door policy has only made good on the first part - passing on feedback to the intended party.

Where it has fallen short is in closing the loop, he says, explaining that since the agency receiving the complaint may not be the one responsible for the issue, it may not be motivated to follow up on the complainant.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser reckons the problem could lie with how an agency's performance is measured.

"Organisations and staff are evaluated on whether they have met their key performance indicators (KPIs), and if cross-agency cooperation does not help them to meet their KPIs, it is quite understandable that they would be assigned low priority," says Dr Tan.

The practice of outsourcing - with different agencies hiring their own private contractors - can further complicate the situation.

At the Tampines field, for example, grass on different tracts of land is trimmed at different times by different contractors hired by the various parties. "They might all be cutting the grass every six months, but the six months may not coincide, so the whole patch is never fully cut at any one time," Mr Baey says.

Dr Tan adds that contractors, paid to perform specific tasks, are "even further removed from any responsibility to cooperate with other government agencies".

"(The contractor's) KPI is to fulfil precisely those things, and nothing else," he says.

Former Nominated MP and NUS sociologist Paulin Straughan suggests over-specialisation could be another factor.

"We may have specialised too much, and in some instances, we have encouraged a bureaucratic culture which encourages us to only focus on what we are officially expected to do, and therefore, negate the merits of a holistic approach to management," she says.

Nee Soon GRC MP Lee Bee Wah cites the example of getting someone to remove bicycles haphazardly chained at MRT stations.

"Who do you contact? SMRT if it's in the station compound? NParks if it's been chained to a tree? Town council if it's to a lamp-post? LTA if it's to a roadside railing?" she asks.

FIXING THE PROBLEM

But will the MSO be the answer?

Some might say that the new office will merely add yet another layer of bureaucracy.

A jaded Jalan Kayu resident, Mr Chris Lau, who once spent eight hours calling the AVA, which handles animal-related issues, waste contractor Sembcorp, the Zoo and Jurong Bird Park to help remove two large eagles that had fallen into his balcony after a mid-air fight, says: "I doubt they will give us an immediate response, and if we have to wait for them to call back, it will be the same problem.

For the MSO to work, everything must be made as simple as possible, says Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad.

"I have one wish: that the MSO has a single hotline, single e-mail and single app for feedback. The more seamless it is, the better."

Getting a minister to pick up after Singaporeans - as some might simplistically describe the role of overseeing the MSO - may also seem extreme, especially when some of the issues can be solved easily with a bit more civic consciousness.

On the infamous fishball stick, many online commentators said the resident who saw it could have just picked it up and thrown it away.

However, Central Singapore District Mayor Denise Phua says having a minister lead the MSO is "an indication of PM's seriousness in wanting to plug this gap".

MPs who spoke to Insight agree that the office may succeed in getting the different agencies to work together, where other schemes and policies have failed, if it is given enough bite.

Ms Phua adds that the office should have "clarity in scope, a shared vision, efficiency and effectiveness as key performance indicators, and sufficient authority to push through sound solutions".

Put in the context of the Government's push for Singapore to become a smart nation that is the "best place to live, work and play", the MSO could well also be an important piece needed to complete the puzzle.

Says Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh: "You do still need different agencies with different specialisations. But there must be a way for the agencies to be 'tacked' together. This is what we mean by being a 'smart city' - integration will also allow for innovation, effectiveness and efficiency."

Dr Straughan also thinks the MSO could promote a greater sense of civic consciousness.

"It shouldn't be yet another office to go to for complaints. Rather, I expect the MSO officers to sit down with (the citizen) and work through the problem together.

"A good model is one where the MSO can discern which issues can be managed locally by residents, and which need to be escalated. If done right, it will empower residents to take charge of their community."

The Government sees the delivery of seamless service by public agencies as a way to build trust with citizens, especially at a time when strategic shifts in policies are being made. Last year, PM Lee stressed the importance of this while speaking to public service leaders at an annual planning session.

At the end of the day, says NUS political scientist Reuben Wong, it is really about running Singapore more efficiently and providing better service to Singaporeans.

The MSO, then, could possibly help extend good service delivery from the ministerial level, all the way to the ground - even, right where a dratted fishball stick might be lying.

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BACKGROUND STORY

WORKING AS ONE

Our ministries are efficient if it involves only one ministry. If it is inter-ministry, you will find that no one wants to lead.

– Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC) on how the MSO would help residents deal with cross-agency municipal issues

SEVEN-YEAR WAIT

It took seven years from envisioning Tampines as a cycling town, to it being declared one. In between, lots of frustration to the extent that I almost wanted to give up!

– Ms Irene Ng (Tampines GRC), recounting the cumbersome process of dealing with multiple agencies to see through her idea

SWIFTER FEEDBACK

In an uncoordinated arrangement, it could take the feedback a while to get to the relevant agency. The delay could discourage people from giving feedback in the first place.

– NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser on how the MSO could improve feedback mechanisms

FREE MPs FOR COMPLEX ISSUES

At this point, we can afford to let MPs rise above the minute municipal details at the tactical level and focus on the strategic and financial governance aspects of estate management. There are still the softer and increasingly complex community issues to deal with.

– IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh on whether the MSO would erode the yardstick of evaluating MPs on how they handle municipal issues from day to day

CLOSING THE GAP

There is nothing wrong with the No Wrong Door policy but sometimes you open more doors than you expect... More importantly, the MSO closes the gap on interactions between resident and government.

– Mr Zaqy Mohamad (Chua Chu Kang GRC) on how the MSO could work where other processes have not