

STEERING FROM THE
CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT
IN TIMES OF COMPLEXITY:

COMPENDIUM OF PRACTICES

HIGHLIGHTS

CONTEXT

Globally, governments are finding themselves at a critical juncture. They are working to modernise their capacities to deliver on cross-cutting issues whilst facing unprecedented and ongoing health, geopolitical and environmental challenges. The context is further challenged by compounding crises, declining trust in public institutions, growing polarisation, challenges to information integrity, and disengagement with traditional democratic processes. In this light, governments increasingly recognise that they can no longer rely on traditional decision-making practices or siloed ways of working.

In this context, sound public governance and corporate management, and the capacity for governments to guide a fit-for-purpose public sector, are essential in ensuring better policy outcomes for citizens. Centres of governments play several key roles in this, from their unique position at the heart of governance structures and can drive forward better public governance on complex and cross-cutting whole of government priorities.

Governments must take more co-ordinated, agile, and proactive action that is founded on trust in public institutions and evidence-informed decision-making.

THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

WHAT IS THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT?

The centre of government (CoG) includes the support structure serving at the highest levels of the executive branch of government, namely of the executive and council of ministers, as well as perform a range of key central roles and functions that support the sound management of governments.

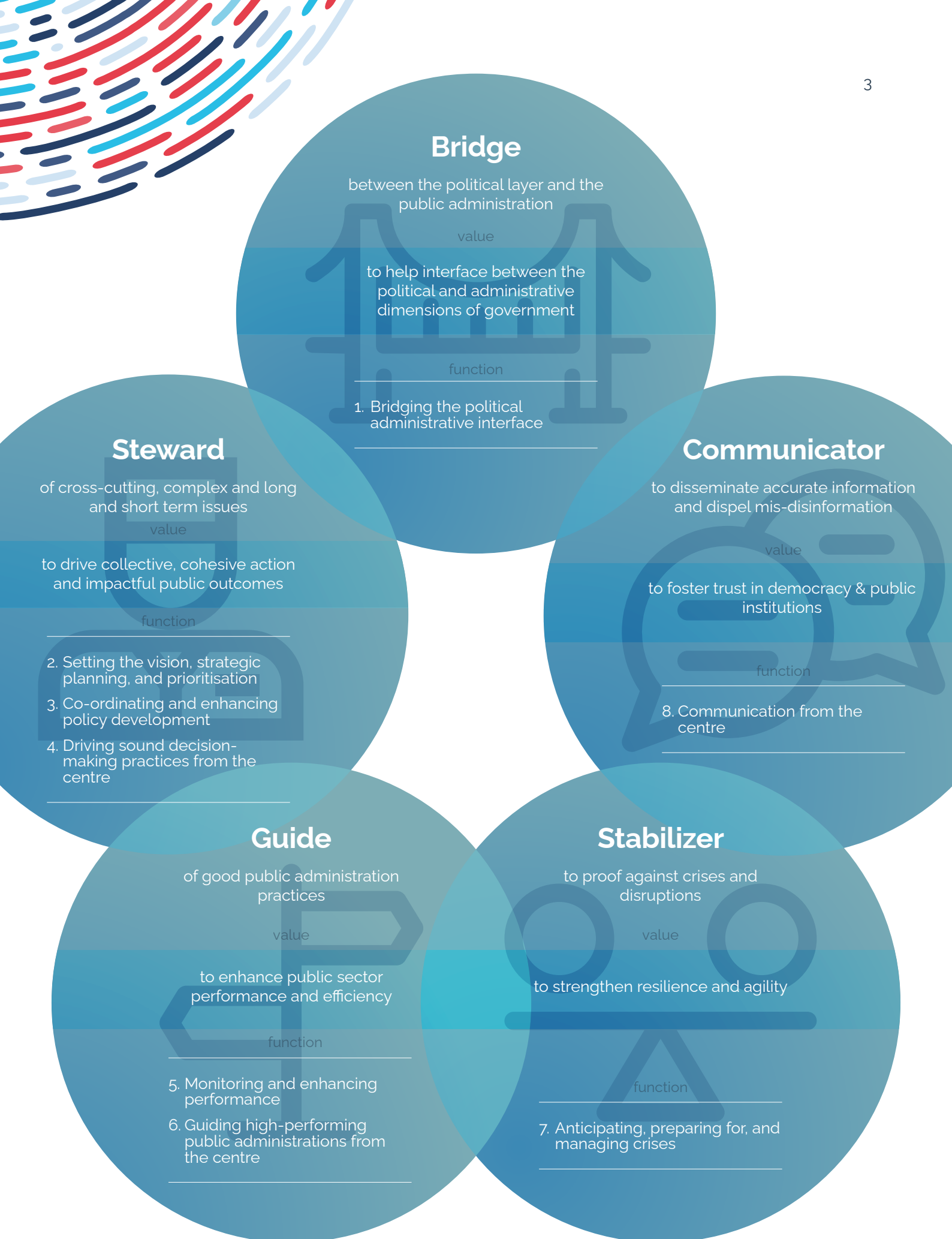
WHO IS IN THE COG?

The CoG is composed of a body or group of bodies at the heart of governance arrangements. They are commonly a combination of an executive office such as the Prime Minister or President's office, and the head of the line ministry that steers finance and budget.

While some countries' CoG's may be made up of a single office, most countries consider key central roles and functions, such as strategic planning and performance management as part of the CoG's role.

This Compendium thus supports discussion at the OECD that indicate that countries are increasingly thinking of their CoGs as a system of support, and are including wider offices and agencies into their definitions of the CoG.

While compositions differ, typical functions or agencies that are often considered as part of the CoG include the office of the Prime Minister/President, the ministry of Treasury/Finance, strategic planning ministries, and public sector/civil service development commissions or offices.



THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

WHAT DOES THE COG DO?

The CoG is at the heart of steering good decision-making and helping governments maintain good corporate management while navigating complex environments.

A well-functioning CoG is critical to help leaders navigate the volatility and complexity of today's challenges, to align the entire public administration to deliver results for and with citizens. The CoG supports by steering overall good decision-making processes, ensuring good performance management, and good corporate management processes.

In this role, the CoG can be the key to making sure that government is greater than the sum of its parts. Ensuring high-quality decision-making and overall performance elevates the practices of the public administration, and helps the government deliver better outcomes for citizens, driving trust in public administrations.

They typically co-ordinate and align policy development across the whole of government, particularly for cross-cutting issues. They support by playing a range of roles and functions, summarized in the framework developed below.

When the right enabling conditions are in place, the CoG can act as a strong system to drive better outcomes for citizens, building trust in public institutions and reinforcing good democratic governance. In this regard, designing a strong CoG relies on the careful consideration of the right elements for an effective system, such as the right material conditions and fit-for-purpose supports.



COMPENDIUM OF PRACTICES

WHAT IS THE COMPENDIUM?

In rapidly evolving contexts, CoGs are faced with growing responsibilities and increasing pressure, making it more difficult to know how to act. This Compendium of practices seeks to bring together the experiences and lessons learnt from CoGs globally. It is designed to support policy and decision-makers in considering their own practices at the CoG, with specific, clear, and practical case examples of the work occurring in diverse CoGs.

HOW WAS IT DEVELOPED?

The Compendium was developed through a co-operative knowledge-sharing process with CoGs globally. 27 countries were surveyed at a high level within their CoGs, through the 2023 “Survey on strategic decision-making at the centre of government” (the “Survey”), the data from which makes up most of the findings presented. The OECD Informal Expert Group on Strategic Decision-making at the Centre of Government served as a unique forum for dialogue and the sharing of practices and lessons learnt and demonstrates the value of collaborative learning processes.

WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT, AND HOW SHOULD IT BE USED?

The Compendium is designed to provide specific, clear, and practical examples of the work occurring in CoGs globally, covering key roles and functions that CoGs play. It is intended to provide a detailed closer view of the key challenges and enablers CoGs are facing with respect to individual areas of practice, including topics such as communications, public administration reform, and stabilizing through crises. Readers may find it useful to review specific CoG roles/ functions that are of interest, in lieu of the document in its entirety.

This Highlights document offers a summary of the analysis provided in the Compendium. Specifically, it seeks to highlight key enablers thematically around roles performed and provides the highest-level overview of the full Compendium.

SIX ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR A STRONG COG

The Compendium surfaced many practices and experiences from CoGs globally, and highlighted the lessons learnt, including key challenges and enablers through such experiences. Below are the six common enabling conditions that help CoGs effectively perform their functions:



1. **Clear roles**, mandates, and spheres of influence



2. **Trusted** relationships with line ministries



3. **Holistic**, intentional, and systemic **approaches**



4. **Political leadership**, clarity, and support



5. Well **co-ordinated** and harmonised functions at the CoG



6. The right people, with the **right skills**, in the right places

ENABLER ONE

Clear roles

Clear roles, mandates, and spheres of influence can make co-ordination and implementation more effective. This enabling condition becomes especially important in relation to co-ordinating across complex and cross-cutting challenges.

Contemporary governance challenges are increasingly cross-cutting, challenging traditional ways of working. Setting clear roles and responsibilities for the CoG can help it understand its role vis-a-vis line ministries, help co-ordinate horizontally across government, and make work more efficient by avoiding duplication. This is particularly important and can be more difficult as many CoGs are starting to take on greater roles, for example in the implementation of climate policies.

Clarity on roles can also help the CoG to bridge the political and administrative interface by acknowledging the roles of both spheres and creating the right mechanisms to allow for the two way interactions between the spheres.

For the CoG to effectively steer work on complex challenges across multiple actors, it also needs to consider the roles within the CoG. Some CoGs have multiple institutions or functions, and have experienced duplications within these.

ENABLER TWO

Trust

Trusted relationships between the CoG and line ministries can help better implementation of the government's agenda. CoGs should focus not only on the functional elements of the ways they steer policy across government, but also give consideration to the relational elements of how they work with line ministries across the political administrative interface.

Without strong, trusted relationships between the CoG and other actors, work on complex and cross-cutting issues could face challenges in efficient implementation. The CoG also needs these relationships to facilitate flows of information and dialogue, for example for the CoG to monitor performance.

This enabling condition becomes particularly important in bridging and ensuring effective dialogue between the administrative and political spheres of government.

ENABLER THREE

Holistic approaches

Holistic, intentional, and systemic approaches can ensure well-aligned and strategic policy development and implementation. This enabling condition becomes especially important in guiding multi-faceted projects such as public administrative reform.

Effective leadership from the centre requires it to take well-designed and considered action. The use of systems and holistic approaches, as well as co-ordination, and monitoring mechanisms to support this, is important for policy development and implementation as the priorities at the CoG are more complex and cross-cutting, challenging traditional ways of working as they sit across multiple ministries.

The CoG also needs holistic approaches to guiding good public administration reform efforts, as stewards of the public administration itself. In order to effectively design and implement context-appropriate and fit-for-purpose reforms, they must use holistic approaches that adequately take into account the people, processes, and data needed.

ENABLER FOUR

Political leadership

Political leadership, clarity and support are needed for the CoG to effectively action the government agenda. This enabling condition becomes especially important for the CoG to effectively steward the government vision and guide its implementation through the public administration.

A clear vision from the government is crucial to the CoGs performance. CoGs serve to translate the government's vision into priorities and actions across ministries. Without a clarity of purpose and support from political leadership, the CoG cannot effectively translate the agenda into action. Clear mandates help CoGs to effectively steward and co-ordinate on behalf of the whole of the public administration. Political buy-in on CoG initiatives, such as for co-ordination activities on complex and cross-cutting policy challenges can also drive more efficient progress. The CoGs close position to the highest political level can allow it to generate support. For the CoG to effectively steer the public administration, it must have a clear vision and direction.

ENABLER FIVE

Co-ordination

Well co-ordinated and harmonised functions at the centre make work more effective and efficient. This enabling condition becomes especially important for the CoG to ensure priorities flow through its many diverse functions smoothly and coherently.

While CoGs have an essential role in co-ordinating complex policy across the whole-of-government, CoGs must also be well-co-ordinated from within. CoG functions and institutions, given the complexity of the many functions they provide, must be harmonised and coherent from within. Activities such as policy action, prioritisation and monitoring are all common functions for CoGs globally, and all are complex with many involved stakeholders, challenging and diverse time-horizons, and require the CoG to be structured in a well-considered manner.

ENABLER SIX

The right workforce

The right people, with the right skills, in the right places, are the functional heart of a high-performing CoG. This enabling condition is especially important for the CoG to be adaptive and respond to its increased role in many areas of work, including in responding to increasingly pressing geopolitical contexts or to crises.

The composition of staff within the CoG is a crucial enabler to the success of all CoG functions, and directly impacts its ability to steer the public administration and enact the government's agenda. CoGs often have limited resources, making obtaining the right mix of skills within the CoG a challenge. Within the CoG, staff must have a good political sense and the ability to react to events. They must be strong in relationship-building, as well as have the necessary technical and managerial skills to steer across the public administration. Furthermore, CoG staff are often an important repository of institutional memory, as they often remain through government transitions, ensuring continuity and developing long-term strategy. These provide some basis for a CoG comprised of a mix of permanent and contingency staff, experts, and political appointees. Ensuring the right mix of long and short term, technical expertise and relationship management, at the CoG, is crucial.

FIVE ROLES OF A HIGH-PERFORMING COG

When the right enabling conditions are in place, the CoG can play five key roles within government to support better outcomes for citizens.

Steward

- Setting the vision, strategic planning, and prioritisation
- Co-ordinating and enhancing policy development
- Driving sound decision-making practices from the centre

Bridge

- Bridging the political administrative interface

Communicator

- Communication from the centre managing crises

Guide

- Monitoring and enhancing performance
- Guiding high-performing public administrations from the centre

Stabilizer

- Anticipating, preparing for, and managing crises

THE COG AS A Bridge

Between the **political** and **administrative**, to **interface** between the two dimensions.

The CoG serves as a crucial point at the interface between administrative officials and the political layer government, facilitating the implementation of government agendas while managing transitions and crises. CoG officials must navigate this complex role adeptly, building trusted relationships with political actors and public administrative officials, through impartial advice and fostering an environment conducive to candid discussions.

The CoG's role as a bridge between administration and politics is subject to contextual nuances and evolving dynamics, and can be especially important during periods of transition between government, or during coalition governments. The skills at the CoG in co-ordinating complex challenges across multiple diverse stakeholders, and in building and maintaining close relationships with line ministries and other stakeholders, are highlighted in their role as a bridge and interface.

Key enablers



Good communications skills to maintain clarity in the role, mandates, and outcomes



A focus on the relational elements, beyond just transactional and functional



The right skills within the workforce of the CoG itself



Clear mechanisms to align values and translate government agenda to work of public administration (range of top-down and bottom-up)

THE COG AS A

Steward

Of **setting the vision, strategic planning, and prioritisation**, across cross-cutting, complex, long and short-term issues, to drive collective, cohesive, and impactful public outcomes.

CoGs play a crucial role in guiding government outcomes, and can steer through the complex challenges of balancing long-term goals with immediate priorities and fostering alignment with the overall government vision and agenda across ministries. They employ various mechanisms to enhance strategic planning practices, including setting frameworks and providing guidance, as well as monitoring their outcomes.

CoGs are increasingly involved in driving cross-cutting policies like climate change and are adopting contemporary approaches to policy development. In 23 out of 26 countries, co-ordination, including monitoring the alignment of policy to government priorities, is under the CoGs' leadership. CoGs support in quality assurance of draft proposals and legislations and revise policy, through tools such as interdepartmental taskforces or expert groups: the Survey found that to support co-ordination and coherence, 88% of CoGs use interdepartmental taskforces, and 73% use expert or advisory groups. Building trusted relationships with line ministries and embedding a culture of evidence-informed decisions are essential for CoGs to support effective government decision-making.

The Survey found that 69% of CoGs have a dedicated unit who work on strategic planning, and 65% have a dedicated unit who work on policy development. Ensuring coherent and intentional development of strategic planning and policy, and monitoring its implementation from a holistic perspective, is essential to high-functioning government, beginning from within the CoG, but also reflected in the leadership the CoG plays in steering the public administration as a whole. The CoG leads the work on strategic planning by defining the overall government long-term vision, and translating this into shorter-term plans and actions. The common framework that CoGs develop through their visioning responsibility steers approaches from across the whole of government.

Key enablers



Clear frameworks for action and hierarchies of high-level strategic planning



Collaborative and fit-for-purpose strategic planning across line ministries and other stakeholders



Sufficient resources and capacity to co-ordinate and steward policy development



Capacity for capability-building throughout public administration to drive culture of evidence-informed decision-making

THE COG AS A Guide

Of **monitoring and enhancing performance**, and of **high-performing public administrations from the centre**, to enhance public sector performance and stability.

Governments are increasingly recognizing the need to move away from traditional modes of working in response to growing complex challenges. The CoG can play an important role in the public administrative reform process, with many taking on a co-ordination role. Public administrative reforms (PARs) are a challenging topic, and are highly context-dependent. Effective PARs are a long-term reform that must be fit-for-purpose, and the CoGs skills in managing prioritisation and supporting long-term cross-cutting challenges are important here.

12 out of 26 countries reported in the Survey that PARs are a top or significant priority for the CoG, indicating the continued importance of steering effective PARs for the CoG. From their unique position in the centre, the CoG can use its co-ordination skills to act as a central authority in ensuring the coherent, multidimensional approach needed is taken throughout the implementation of the PAR. CoGs play an important role in steering the public administration, and as such have an important opportunity to lead by example in better practices on co-ordination from within.

Key enablers



Strong, sustained messaging to foster learning culture and drive implementation at all levels



Holistic and adaptive approaches to embedding culture of data-informed decision-making



Inclusive practices such as data sharing that bring in stakeholders and citizens



Strong overarching strategies to make use of good practices around strategic planning



Fit-for-purpose, context-informed structures and mechanisms to support PAR implementation

THE COG AS A Stabilizer

To **anticipate, prepare for, and manage crises**, to ward against disruptions, and strengthen resilience and agility.

Managing crises and disruptions is a core government competency. Citizens turn to their governments for leadership, and trust in government and public institutions more broadly is crucial and tested in these moments. CoGs play an important role in stabilizing throughout crisis, by providing leadership and acting as a central point of co-ordination for decision-making. In 85% of surveyed countries, CoGs have taken on further responsibilities to manage the challenges of increased and compounding crises. The Survey found that in 2023, 42% of countries now have a dedicated team at the CoG to support crisis management functions. By providing political leadership and a central point of co-ordination, CoGs can contribute to the efficient management of crises and the implementation of necessary measures. Their involvement also helps maintain public trust.

Key enablers



A range of strategic foresight approaches to feed strategic planning & crisis preparation



The right balance of tools, balancing innovative approaches and maintaining trusted channels



Effective co-ordination approaches to convene various diverse actors for decision-making



Strong monitoring and post-crisis evaluation practices to learn from past events

THE COG AS A

Communicator

To **disseminate accurate** information and **dispel misinformation** from the centre, and to foster trust in democracy and public institutions.

Managing crises and disruptions is a core government competency. Citizens turn to their governments for leadership, and trust in government and public institutions more broadly is crucial and tested in these moments. CoGs play an important role in stabilizing throughout crisis, by providing leadership and acting as a central point of co-ordination for decision-making. In 85% of surveyed countries, CoGs have taken on further responsibilities to manage the challenges of increased and compounding crises. The Survey found that in 2023, 42% of countries now have a dedicated team at the CoG to support crisis management functions. By providing political leadership and a central point of co-ordination, CoGs can contribute to the efficient management of crises and the implementation of necessary measures. Their involvement also helps maintain public trust.

Key enablers



Two-way dialogue between the administration and external stakeholders to foster inclusion and responsive policy/decision-making



Systemic approach to ensure consistent information



Accessible and available data to build transparency, accountability, and trust



Investment in enhancing capabilities for insights and organisational listening

CULTIVATING THE COG AS A SYSTEM

Building a high-functioning CoG in the context of a challenging and changing environment, with both new demands and increases in existing work, is no easy task. Governments are rethinking the shape of their CoGs: understanding them as a system of complex elements, rather than a single unit or office.

CoGs are made up of diverse inputs including people, processes, information and data, and are a complex ecosystem of governance in and of themselves. As roles and responsibilities at the CoG change, CoGs must also change to ensure that as they respond to new developments, they maintain a coherence and cohesion at the centre itself.

Thinking systemically about the CoG also reveals that through ensuring the right organisational design, workforce development, and the right material inputs and supports, the CoG can operate more sustainably and effectively.



Thoughtful organisational design, through fit-for-purpose mandates, structures, or mechanisms, can help the CoG work across boundaries.



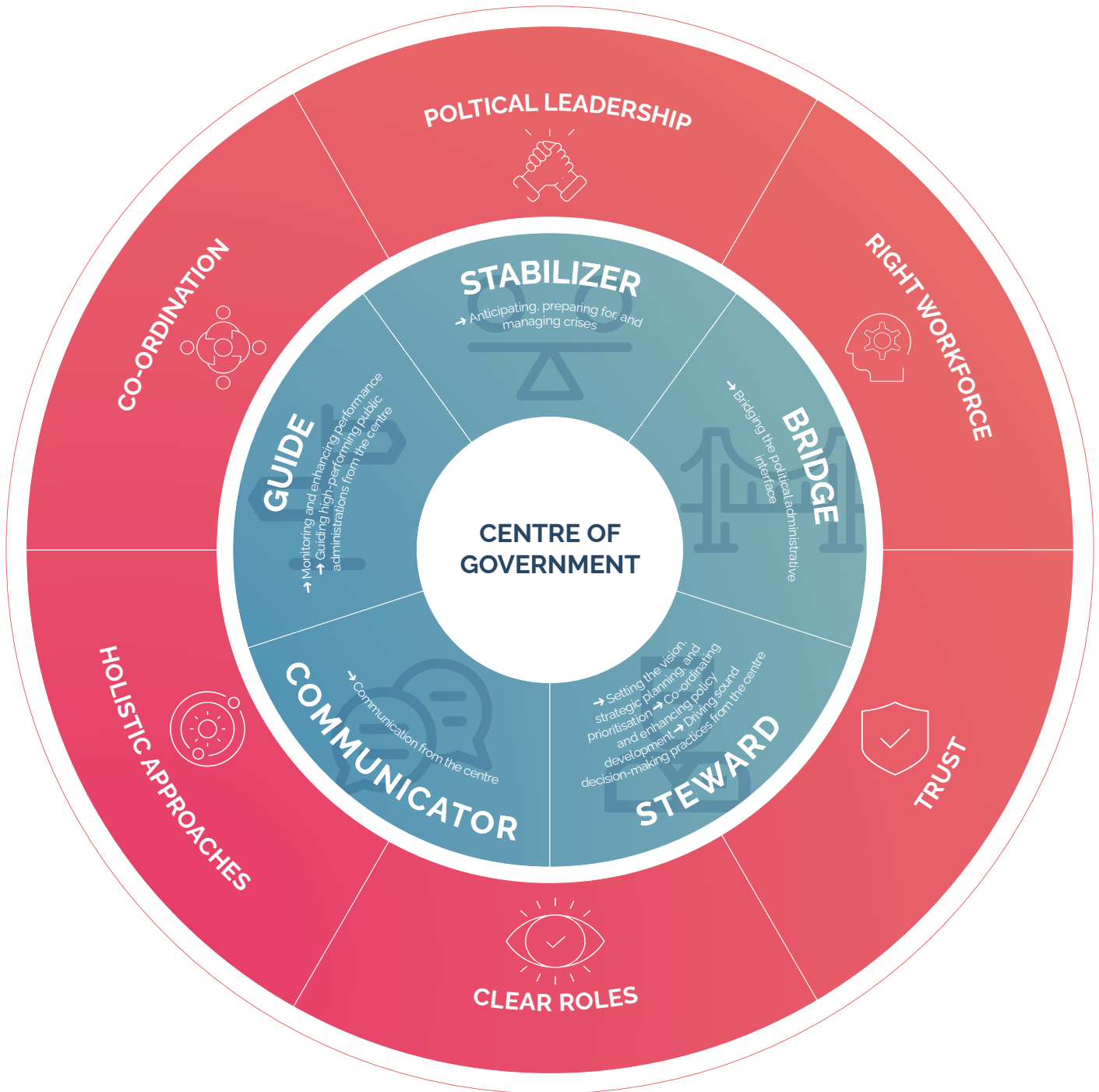
The right composition of staff and set of skills within the CoG, with a mix of permanent and contingency, and of political and administrative staff, as well as professional development can enable success.

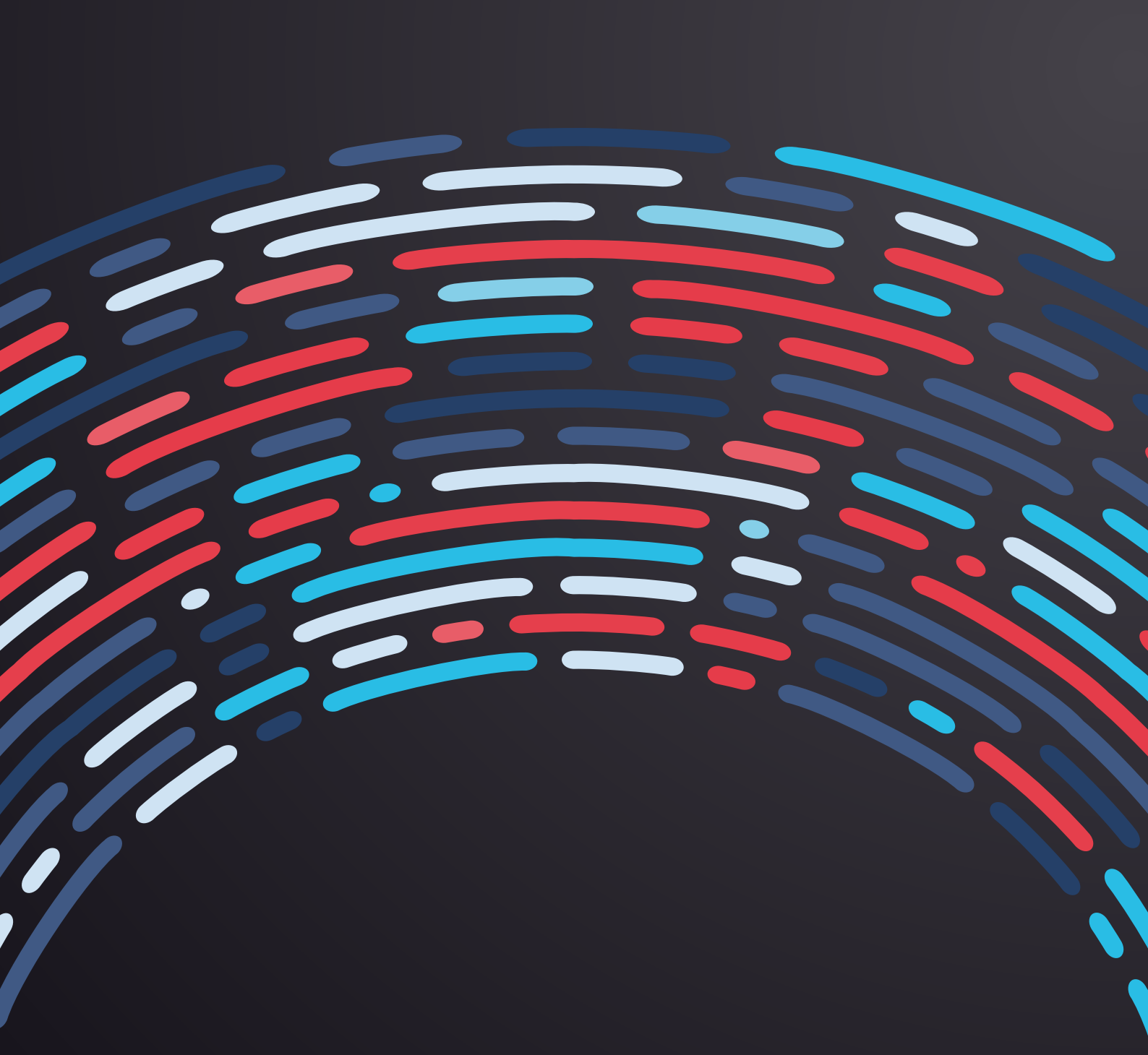


The CoG needs material supports including access to data, careful consideration of workflows, and new digital tools, to effectively co-ordinate.

With the right enabling conditions in place, the CoG can effectively undertake its five core functions. While CoG activities and compositions range globally, careful design of the CoG as a system can be the key to making it more than the sum of its parts, helping it drive whole-of-government priorities forward.







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