

Realising Prevention: Practical Policies for Healthier Society

Joining up government for public health

The issue

There is growing recognition that tackling complex social problems, like [climate change](#) and [health inequalities](#), can only happen by building strong interconnections across policy jurisdictions and sectors. Over the decades, a slew of initiatives have sought to achieve more joined-up government in the UK, from Churchill's abortive system of 'overlords' through to the short-lived levelling up agenda. Despite these and many similar attempts, [Whitehall retains a structure of competing departmental fiefdoms](#).

The new government will only be able to succeed on its ambitious healthy life expectancy (HLE) targets if it finds solutions to this notoriously difficult governance challenge. This is because improving HLE and tackling health inequalities will require action on the wider determinants of health: education, the built environment, workplace conditions, community support etc. And the only way to galvanise health oriented policymaking across these diverse sectors is with an institutional framework that links a diverse constellation of government actors.

Understanding the problem

Joined-up policy entails two distinct sets of issues.

- **Whitehall:** the horizontal integration of Whitehall departments and agencies.
- **Devolution:** the vertical integration of the UK's many government tiers, from national to local.

Horizontal integration

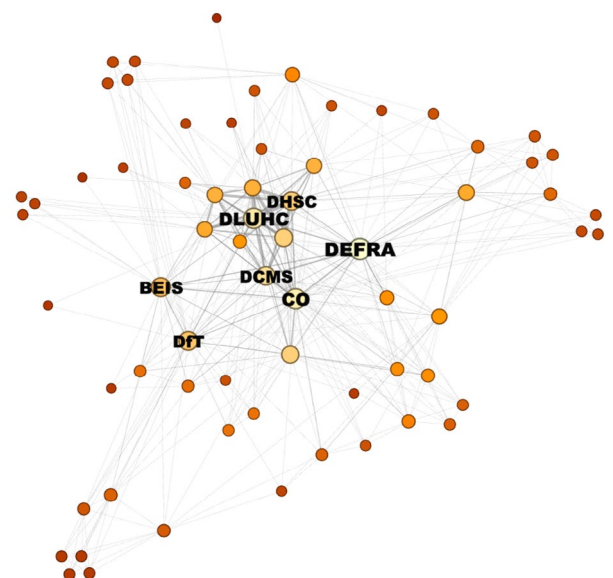
Over the years, every joined-up government initiative in the UK has sought to enact change through some sort of central coordinating body. Some have disappeared without trace, others have left institutional legacies, such as [Cabinet Committees](#), [Task Forces](#) and [cross-department units](#). Ultimately, No.10, the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury remain

the institutions most able to deliver join-up.

In recent years, two new approaches have been favoured:

- **Missions:** the levelling up missions and now mission driven government seek to mobilise all policymakers around key outcome metrics.
- **Pilots:** since 2021, through the [Shared Outcomes Fund](#) has provided pilot funding for a wide-range of inter-departmental initiatives.

Our analysis of the 60 pilot initiatives found that partnerships between the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) sit at the heart of an emerging web of cross-government working. Using social network analysis, [Figure 1 shows how government departments are linked up through their shared involvement in the Shared Outcomes Fund pilots](#). These pilots provide an important foundation for joining up Whitehall.



Recent government progress

In recent years, major investigations into cross-government working have been carried out by the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee, HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office. In its ‘Managing Public Money’ guidance, HM Treasury identified different models for cross-government working, which includes departments working together on a specific policy, government priorities delivered by multiple departments, and departments sharing best practice. The NAO and PAC reports welcomed this guidance but criticized the lack of detail on how these models should be established, managed, and delivered. They also called for much greater evaluation of cross-government working. [The Government response to these reports welcomed all recommendations and indicated a commitment to implement them.](#)

Vertical integration

Conversations about cross-government working, joined-up government and whole-of-government approaches often ignore other government tiers. However, none of the progress outlined above considers the importance of local or devolved government.

There is instead a tendency to think of multi-level governance as a separate issue to be considered by separate teams, and yet, as Figure 2 makes clear, MHCLG is by far the most active department in terms of the cross-cutting outcomes laid out in the 2021 Spending Review. As Figure 1 shows, it is also at the heart of the network of departmental collaborations. This indicates the importance of local government in cross-government working.

To deliver effective public health policy, it is crucial to join up central government, devolved governments, and local governments. Local government has a statutory duty for public health and delivers most social care services. Combined authorities have responsibility for the policy areas that most affect the wider determinants of health. [The devolved nations have devolved health policy, enabling the four countries of the UK to be policy laboratories, as long as they learn from one another.](#) The recent reforms to [intergovernmental relations](#) have made important steps forward, and the new government’s commitment to working closely with devolved government is definitely to be welcomed, but the remains a lack of strategic overlap between cross-government working and intergovernmental relations.

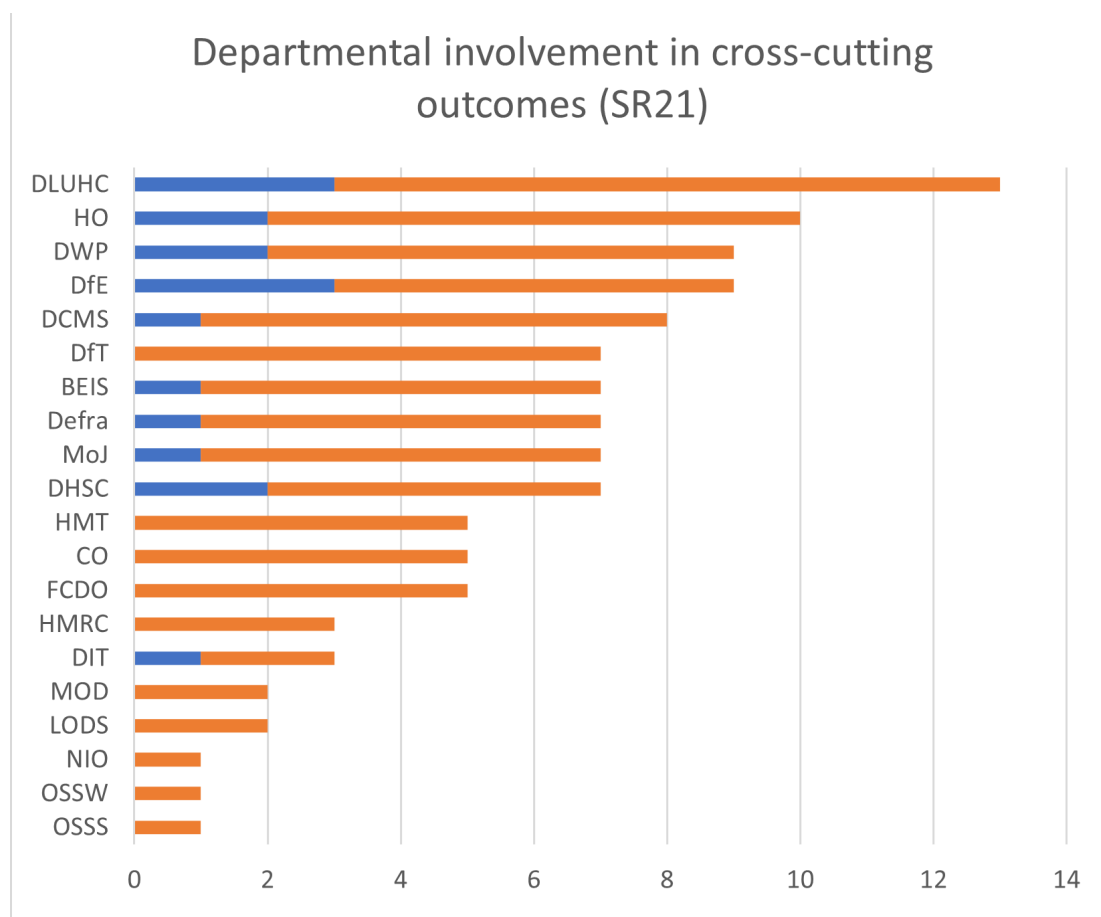


Figure 2: TRUUD analysis of the cross-cutting outcomes outlined in Spending Review 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/autumn-budget-and-spending-review-2021-documents>

Three first steps for healthier cross-government working

Health is the theme of one of the government's five missions, but with a focus on 'building an NHS fit for the future', there is a risk that this mission is delivered narrowly through the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). To really change the state of public health, it is essential to target the wider determinants of health through cross-government working. The [international literature](#) shows that public health tends to be at the forefront of joined-up government approaches. Therefore, it is not just that cross-government working is needed to improve public health, but also that pursuing a public health mission is likely to galvanise joined-up working and lead to system innovations.

To help realise this potential opportunity, we make three recommendations:

- 1. Upscale existing collaborations:** The link between DHSC (including the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) and MHCLG is crucial to integrate local government into national health policy, and to realise the benefits of healthy urban development in policy areas like Housing. TRUUD has been working with both departments to facilitate cross-departmental working. Although the wider government structures are important, there is a huge opportunity to upscale existing collaborations, learning from what already works.
- 2. A comprehensive strategy for cross-government working:** To ensure that joined up government is not just a horizontal Whitehall exercise, it is essential to develop a comprehensive 'cross-government working strategy' that integrates the horizontal interdepartmental collaboration with the vertical dimension of intergovernmental relations. This needs to include closer working with local government on service delivery, more devolution to combined authorities on public health, and more effective health policy learning across the devolved nations. All these strands need to be more effectively tied together through formal institutions and processes.
- 3. Create the conditions for more collaboration:** Realising joined-up government is not just about the careful construction of partnerships and cross-cutting institutions. There is also the need to create the right environment and framework within which collaboration can happen more organically. This places emphasis on the importance of measures and metrics. TRUUD has been working with MHCLG to embed its economic valuation tool in MHCLG appraisal guidance. Implementing this appraisal tool more consistently across central government and government tiers could encourage greater collaboration between different policy teams. [Find out more...](#)

Contact the authors

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The research underpinning the recommendations is the work of a much [wider range of TRUUD researchers](#). We welcome opportunities to discuss this work. To get in touch, please contact the team at truud-policy@bristol.ac.uk.



Local authority partners



University consortium

