



Cross-sector collaboration at work

Enabling leaders to deliver
prosperity and economic growth



Foreword



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For leaders across the UK, regardless of sector, dealing with uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are part and parcel of their roles. Yet, with ever-increasing interconnected and complex challenges facing our society and economy, trying to find solutions can seem daunting and overwhelming.

Cross-sector collaboration – an approach to working across public, private and not-for-profit sectors for the common good – can help to address the biggest challenges of our time. Many forward-thinking leaders recognise this, but few feel enabled to pursue it in the face of low levels of trust, misaligned objectives and poor communication between sectors. Over the next five years, WIG wants to address these challenges and support more leaders to better collaborate across sectors.

And the time is right, with a new UK government advocating cross-sector partnerships as vital to delivering on its key growth mission. WIG will work with its members to focus on three core enablers to support leaders to improve cross-sector collaboration for national prosperity by:

- 1 Increasing opportunities for cross-sector strategic dialogue
- 2 Enhancing cross-sector leadership capabilities – for today's and tomorrow's leaders
- 3 Evidencing what works in cross-sector collaboration

With 40 years' experience in connecting leaders across the sectors, WIG is uniquely placed to support forward-thinking leaders to help deliver the national growth that will support communities across the UK to prosper.

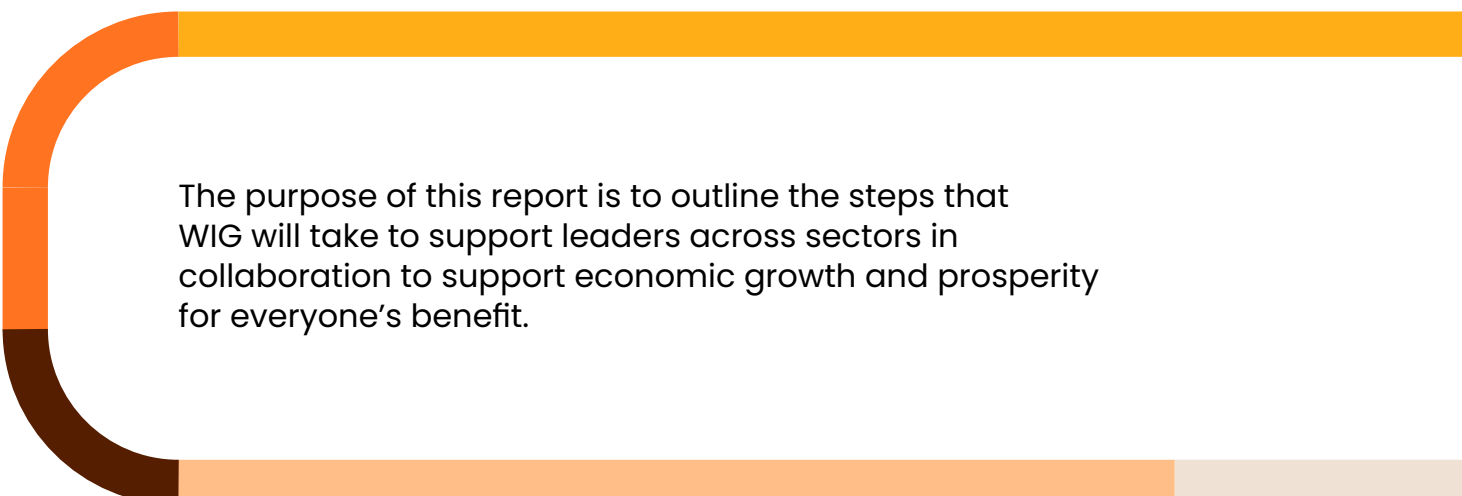
Rachel Sandby-Thomas CB Chair, WIG
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Why is cross-sector collaboration important right now?

The new UK Government has committed to partnership working across the sectors as a key enabler to delivering on its core missions to help drive economic growth. And in a recent survey¹, when asked if collaboration across the sectors can support economic growth, 92% of leaders in the public sector agreed, along with 93% from the private sector and 88% from not-for-profits and higher education.

Yet when asked to rate the state of collaboration between the sectors, only 4% of those in the public sector rated it as 'good', with only 7% in the private sector doing the same. No one rated it as 'excellent', with the rest of the respondents answering as 'average', 'bad' or 'terrible'. Slightly more optimistically, 16% in not-for-profits and higher education cited it as 'good' or 'excellent'.

There is clearly work to be done.



The purpose of this report is to outline the steps that WIG will take to support leaders across sectors in collaboration to support economic growth and prosperity for everyone's benefit.

¹ WIG Survey: The State of Cross-sector Collaboration 2024. WIG surveyed 274 leaders across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors in August/September 2024. All participants were part of a WIG member organisation.

In recent years there have been both highs and lows in terms of how the public, private and not-for-profit sectors have worked together. The pinnacle of collaboration was seen throughout the pandemic. The vaccine taskforce and ventilator challenge were two stand-out examples. Both demonstrated the possibility to deliver for public good when sectors were aligned, focused on outcomes and willing to share risk, albeit in unique circumstances.

A survey of leaders carried out by WIG in September 2024 revealed the key areas where cross-sector collaboration was deemed to be most effective:

- For public sector leaders, it was deemed most effective in delivering industrial strategy, net-zero, supply chain security and attracting inward investment.
- For private sector leaders, it was deemed most effective in security and defence, net-zero, attracting inward investment, securing supply chains and industrial strategy.

The survey also revealed some key areas of need where cross-sector collaboration should be improved and prioritised to support economic growth:

- Public sector leaders cited net-zero, long-term infrastructure delivery, and regional economic growth.
- Private sector leaders cited long-term infrastructure delivery, reforming public service delivery/government efficiency, and regional economic growth.

Working together to achieve shared public policy outcomes not only supports the government, it provides economic growth opportunities for businesses and supports not-for-profits and universities in achieving their societal goals.

The fundamentals of cross-sector collaboration

We define cross-sector collaboration as ‘...the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organisations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organisations in one sector separately’².

Collaboration relies on deep relationships, built on trust, structure, and shared responsibility, and is an approach that has long-termism at its core.

In partnership with the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, WIG produced the ‘Collaboration Playbook: A Leaders’ Guide to Cross-sector Collaboration’. The extensive research, which focused on the academic basis of collaboration alongside case studies from across the UK, identified five foundations of successful cross-sector collaboration for leaders to consider.

There is no shortage of areas that demand cross-sector collaboration. The so-called ‘wicked’ policy problems³ of our time will arguably only be truly addressed with partners from across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors working together.

These ‘wicked’ challenges are those where the problems are ‘ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing’.

The most obvious examples include tackling climate change, addressing inequality, achieving economic growth and prosperity, harnessing new technology, and finding solutions to global health issues.



Leadership: a collaborative leader must be effective at bringing together disparate sources of information and opinion to improve understanding and develop better solutions.



Trust: while long acknowledged as a prerequisite for successful collaboration, in reality, many collaborations begin with no foundations of trust or a lack of it.



Culture: successful collaborations require diverse partners but there is a risk of cultural clashes which can hamper progress. A leader must be able to understand and manage different ‘institutional logics’.



Power: imbalances in power are common in collaborations. While the balance may shift over time, marked power disparities undermine the benefits of collaboration.



Ongoing learning: when managing collaborations, formative and summative evaluations should be used so that performance is assessed in terms of function and outcome.

² Bryson et al.: ‘The Design and Implementation’.

³ Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber: ‘Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning’.

Cross-sector collaboration in the UK: The leaders' view



The need is clear

92%

believe that **cross-sector collaboration can support economic growth** and positive public policy outcomes for the UK



But there's a problem

Just 11%

of respondents rated current cross-sector collaboration as 'Good' or 'Excellent'



So what's getting in the way?

After 'Bureaucratic hurdles', over half of leaders cited issues relating to alignment, culture and communication.

66%

of leaders cited misaligned objectives

59%

believed there was a lack of communication

57%

felt there were issues around trust and mutual respect

We know the solutions

Across the public, private and non-profit sectors, the following enablers were identified as critical for cross-sector collaboration:



Shared goals and alignment



Clear communication



Trust and mutual respect



Strong leadership

But are leaders equipped to deliver them?



While 62% of respondents cited that they, or their organisation, had **strong cross-sector networks**



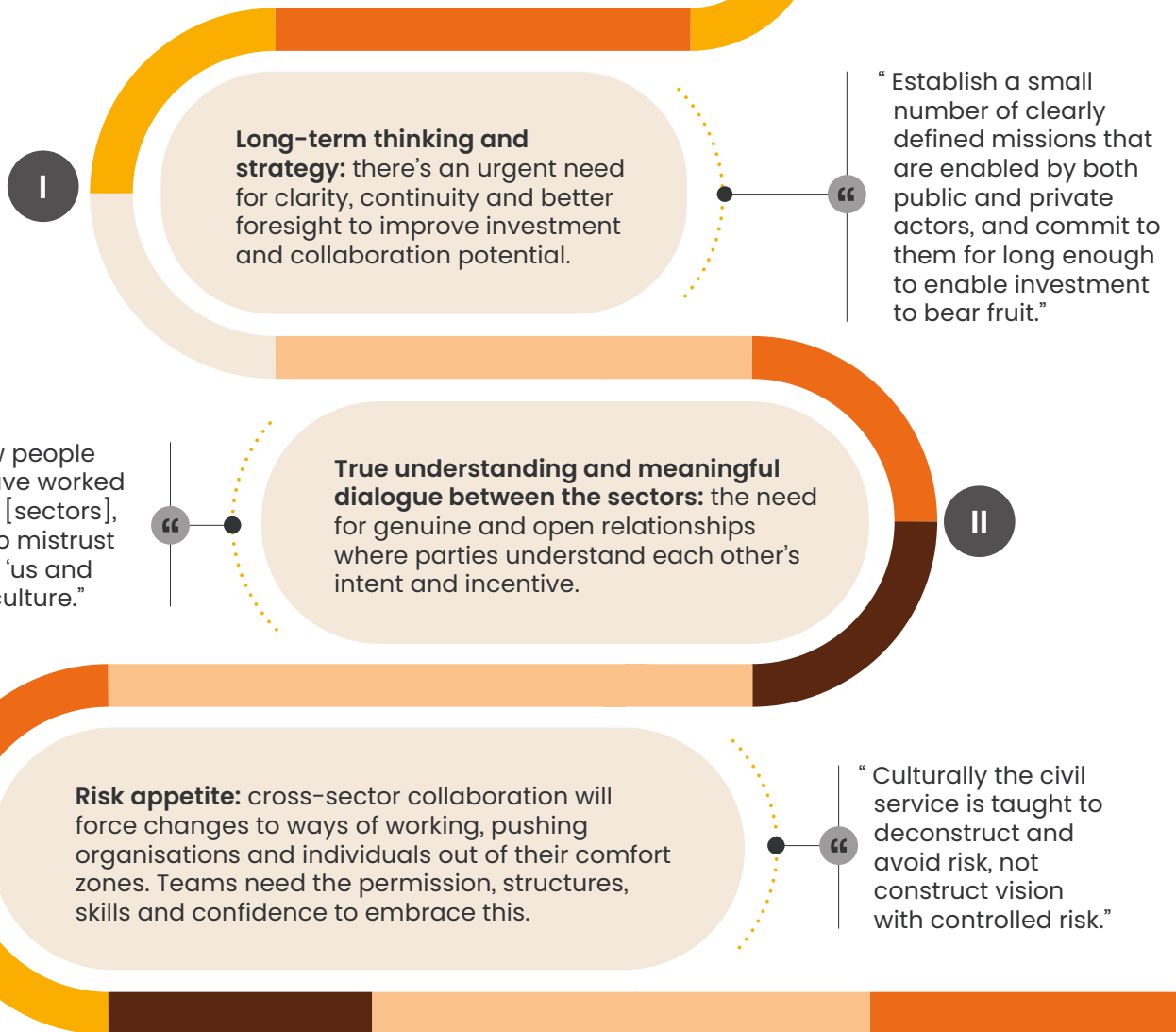
Only 14% felt **very confident** in their ability to collaborate across sectors



Just 1/3 of leaders had **received specific training** and development

So what needs to change – recommendations from leaders

Beyond the clearly articulated need for ‘transparent and genuinely aligned goals’, three key themes emerged from the survey.



Building better cross-sector collaboration: How WIG supports leaders

01



Strategic dialogue

Focused cross-sector discussion on the UK’s priority long-term policy issues.

Delivered through:

- Briefings and senior roundtables
- Content and reports
- NED and Board placements

02



Leadership capabilities

Equipping leaders with cross-sector understanding and a collaborative skillset.

Delivered through:

- Cross-sector secondments
- Cross-sector mentoring
- Leadership development

03



Evidencing best practice

Sharing what works, and what doesn’t, to improve collaborative outcomes.

Delivered through:

- Case studies
- Leadership series
- Organisational ‘Raids’

The WIG action plan

We will work with our members across government, public sector, business, not-for-profits and higher education to build on our existing programmes of work to create further capacity and capabilities for cross-sector collaboration by:

- 1 Increasing opportunities for cross-sector strategic dialogue
- 2 Enhancing cross-sector leadership capabilities - for today's and tomorrow's leaders
- 3 Evidencing what works in cross-sector collaboration

1 Increasing opportunities for cross-sector strategic dialogue

Intelligence sharing

To enable collaboration, establishing trust between the sectors is a key foundation. Increasing transparency and information flows will unlock both the opportunities for collaboration and support with creating a sense of shared endeavour.

When asked whether communication and dialogue between the public and private sectors is sufficient, leaders from the two sectors gave worrying responses: 82% from UK industry disagreed that it was sufficient, with 72% from the public sector sharing these views.

There are many reasons for this lack of dialogue: inadequate forums for such conversations, commercial or data sensitivities, not being seen as business critical, challenges in measuring how much of this information supports decision-making in any given organisation, or simply finding the time are often cited.

WIG ACTION

Leaders in all sectors should consider how strategic dialogue can be part of ongoing development for both themselves, and those across their organisations. Ensuring a structured and embedded approach to spending time with parties outside their own sector should be part of any stakeholder engagement plan, to establish what opportunities and risks exist, and how cross-sector collaboration may be an asset.

From 2024, we will increase strategic dialogue opportunities on public policy and corporate challenges, capturing and sharing intelligence, including between CEOs and Permanent Secretaries, aligned with government missions.

Alongside this, we will capture core themes shared in the discussions, which will be circulated to all sectors so that current and future leaders can consider their implications and opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.

Network building and social capital

Building trust and understanding between sectors as a key enabler of collaboration is critical. For all sectors, breaking down siloes and expanding networks needs to be viewed as business-critical. Yet time out of the office is often tricky to justify, especially with competing priorities. Building social capital is often put toward the bottom of the priority list.

For those in the private sector, owing mostly to dedicated government affairs functions, 61% agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the core challenges the civil service was facing. The public sector had slightly less understanding of the challenges that the private sector was facing, with 45% in agreement or strong agreement. Interestingly, when asked whether those in the public sector had a strong network with the private sector, 50% of civil servants leaders thought they did, while 78% in the private sector thought they had a strong public sector network.

**WIG
ACTION**

There are clearly opportunities to take the pre-existing networks among the leaders of today and tomorrow and expand them, making the dialogue more intentional and more focused on solution-based outcomes. Increasing social capital and network building can only serve to boost understanding between sectors.

From 2025, we will increase the number of roundtable discussions for public policymakers and government affairs professionals, allowing for greater exchange and relationship-building between sectors and organisations aligned with government missions.

In 2026, this will become a formalised network which will focus on key 'campaigns' for cross-sector collaboration, exploring core challenges around specific complex policy or social issues and how to better collaborate.



Governance and the cross-sector board

When public, private and not-for-profit leaders were asked whether it was important to have boards that understand the opportunities, challenges and motives across the sectors, a staggering 89% agreed or strongly agreed.

Yet board diversity - in terms of sector representation and diversity of thought - remain perspectives which can be underdeveloped. If culture starts from the top, and there is a need for board leadership to drive cross-sector collaboration, it suggests why challenges remain.

Fundamental change will need a clear focus on diversity of thought and experience, bringing in external representation to boards from other sectors. Central government departments and most major arms-length bodies are already doing this, utilising talent from outside the civil service to support on organisational challenges; there is scope for other sectors to do the same. These outside voices can add real value, a different way of thinking and also serve to bridge the gap between the sectors.

WIG ACTION

We will continue to facilitate cross-sector board discussions to share strategic challenges and build our networks so that by 2028 we will be a hub of cross-sector board talent, developing a pool of non-executive leaders that offers cross-sector diversity for boards across all sectors.

2 Enhancing cross-sector leadership capabilities – for today's and tomorrow's leaders

Collaborative leadership

There are specific characteristics that make leaders successful in achieving outcomes in cross-sector endeavours. We need to recognise, develop and nurture these capabilities.

Our survey found that 96% of leaders in the public sector, 90% in the private sector and 90% in not-for-profits agreed that strong leadership capabilities were vital. Yet worryingly, only 18% of civil servants, 26% of private sector leaders and 34% of those in not-for-profits were offered training and development on the skills required to participate effectively in cross-sector collaborations.

WIG ACTION

From 2024, we will publish annually a 'State of Cross-sector Collaboration' leadership survey and produce ongoing yearly insight for leaders across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors to understand how organisations are viewing the cross-sector collaboration landscape. This will be presented to leaders across all sectors outlining the core trends, development and progress to ensure we are clear on what is and isn't working.

In 2024, we will launch a new advanced collaborative leadership programme and, in 2025, we will relaunch our cross-sector leadership programmes with models for cross-sector collaborative leadership embedded, focusing on both the leaders of today and also the leaders of tomorrow, incorporating the skillset, mindset and capabilities to meaningfully address the challenges of partnerships.

From 2025, we will also convene Chief People Officer roundtables to grow a cross-sector network to advise on growing leadership development capabilities.



Porosity- skills and talent exchange across sectors

The interchange of knowledge, skills and talent between sectors is one of the key enabling factors and leadership development opportunities to help ensure the greatest impact of collaborative work. Various efforts to reform the civil service to increase porosity have emphasised secondments as a key intervention.

According to our recent survey, 76% of leaders from the public sector, 82% from the private sector and 78% from the not-for-profit sector agreed that the greater movement of people between sectors would support cross-sector collaboration and economic growth.

Yet the scale of secondments is limited despite widespread and ongoing efforts to increase the porosity agenda especially across central government departments. Where there are secondments happening, it is dominated by inward secondments into the civil service and substantially fewer spend time outside the public sector. There is clearly an imbalance.

The porosity agenda, while a constant, has struggled to happen at scale. The reasons for this are many. Conflicts of interest, confidentiality, challenges with agreeing terms, workforce planning, clear KPIs on benefit and impact, lack of clarity on rationale, and workplace security are just a few of the reasons cited.

Alternative approaches and models for cross-sector knowledge exchange are needed. Cross-sector mentoring, scaled secondment programmes, exchange models, shadowing and externships all have a role to play - approached on a programmatic basis with long-term visibility of the pipeline and opportunity.

WIG ACTION

From 2025, we will publish annual impact and data metrics from our 'Charity Next' government-charity secondment programmes to support the business case for secondment programmes.

From 2025, we will work with partners to develop 'off the shelf' solutions for secondment, mentoring, exchange and shadowing schemes to enable greater porosity, increasing exposure to sectors for today's leaders and future leaders.

3 Evidencing what works in cross-sector collaboration

Evidence of what works

One of the most challenging aspects of cross-sector collaboration is evidencing what works. No two collaborative endeavours across the sectors share the same context, partners, or solution. Establishing clear returns on investment in terms of money, time, staffing, and risk is near impossible to measure as it would have to be considered against the counterfactual (i.e. one organisation doing it themselves).

Much of the pre-existing research around cross-sector collaboration tends to focus on the local or regional level where partnership between sectors is perhaps more forthcoming owing to stronger relationships between leaders, and a less complex 'system'.

Championing the need, the successes and the challenges should be seen as an imperative. There are many examples where leaders in all sectors have gone beyond their organisational siloes and led on achieving outcomes that could not have been achieved in isolation.

When WIG members were asked for examples of outstanding collaboration between sectors, there was no shortage of answers: COVID-19 vaccine taskforce; DWP Restart scheme; Contracts for Difference Schemes; the GREAT campaign; life-sciences strategy; and Media City in Salford were just a few such examples.

To truly create a movement and bias towards cross-sector collaboration more needs to be done to share the lessons learnt from those initiatives, projects and outcomes. Capturing the 'how' will be pivotal to apply lessons elsewhere across different issues, sectors and industries. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach for leaders to utilise, examples of successful approaches need to be reviewed and discussed.

The logo consists of a yellow circle containing the text "WIG ACTION" in bold, black, uppercase letters. A thick orange vertical bar is positioned to the left of the circle, and a light beige curved shape is at the bottom left of the page.

WIG ACTION

From 2025, we will harness our alumni network of 1,000+ senior leaders from across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors to act as role models and galvanise others to follow suit. We will create a cross-sector leadership network to discuss what is and isn't working, share best practice and advocate for a new approach. This will sit alongside articles, events and programmes that champion the key learnings from leaders to support learning and understanding.

From 2026, we will launch a new conference to place a spotlight on evidencing which collaborative initiatives have provided real world impact and results. The purpose will be to give insight from those who have been part of these efforts, revealing what has and hasn't worked and how they have successfully resulted in public good, economic growth or other key positive social outcomes.

Benchmarking internationally

Linking to the lack of evidence on 'what works', there remains a gap for the UK in terms of learning best practice from other parts of the world. There is a huge amount that those across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors can learn from global case studies and approaches to partnering. Germany, Israel, Singapore, USA, Australia and New Zealand are just a few examples where the sectors, on certain issues, are working effectively together.

Finding a new dynamic, a new model and a focus on outcomes should help make the case for more cross-sector collaboration in the UK. While it will never be the case of replicating like for like, the focus should be on understanding issues where cross-sector collaboration was deployed as a tool, the models that have been trialled and delivered positive outcomes, and the potential roadblocks and challenges along the journey. Keeping abreast of these developments on an international level is challenging for all leaders.

There are a number of organisations who have, for some years, been working in this space like the Partnering Initiative here in the UK, the Intersector Project in the USA, or, on a global level, the UN Sustainability Goals, all of which have cross-sector collaboration at their core.

**WIG
ACTION**

By 2028, we will undertake international benchmarking on how other countries encourage cross-sector leadership collaboration, working with overseas partners to showcase their approaches to cross-sector working, translating it to potential applications within the UK, and highlighting the leaders and research which has supported in making these countries, regions or projects successful.

In summary

Leaders from across the sectors believe that cross-sector collaboration could help drive economic growth.

We will strengthen our work to help members work better together by:

- 1 Increasing opportunities for cross-sector strategic dialogue
- 2 Enhancing cross-sector leadership capabilities - for today's and tomorrow's leaders
- 3 Evidencing what works in cross-sector collaboration

Uniquely placed to convene the sectors, it is our mission to drive improvements in these three areas and support the leaders of today and tomorrow drive better outcomes for national prosperity through effective cross-sector collaboration.



What's needed	Why	Outcomes	WIG enablers
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Increasing strategic dialogue

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understanding of economic, political, social context. • A focus on the long-term. • Input genuinely sought from cross-sector contributors for innovation and delivery. 	<p>Only 7% of leaders felt communication between sectors was sufficient.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and transparency around long-term thinking and opportunities for collaboration. • Alignment, goal congruence and sense of shared endeavour. • Network building and improved trust. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefings • Roundtables • CEO-Permanent Secretary dialogue • Content and reports • NED and Trustee placements
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Enhancing leadership capabilities

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders with a collaborative mindset. • Leaders with a better understanding of the motivations and logics of other sectors. • Leaders with the right bridging skills to capitalise on cross-sector expertise. 	<p>Only 14% of people felt very confident in their ability to collaborate across sectors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More productive, progressive relationships and partnerships. • Cultural understanding and mutual respect between sectors. • Improved trust. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership development programmes • Secondments • Mentoring • NED and Trustee placements
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Evidencing what works

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An effective way to share lessons and best practice in cross-sector leadership and collaboration. • An understanding of the impact. • International benchmarking to identify new practices. 	<p>Around one quarter of leaders weren't sure whether their organisation was collaborating effectively.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accelerated learning and adoption of best practices. • Aligned approach for tackling the UK's biggest challenges. • Transparent, supportive leadership network. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership series and case studies • Benchmarking and reports • Special events • Organisational Raids: benchmarking and best practice
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Jessie Buscombe, Chair, Education, Employment and Skills Board, City of Westminster and Leadership Coach

Get in touch

We are always keen to hear from forward-thinking leaders, so if you'd like to learn more about WIG or share your experience of cross-sector leadership and collaboration please do get in touch.

Email: Membership@WIG.co.uk

You can also read more about the essentials of cross-sector collaboration and the state of cross-sector collaboration in our publications:

- Collaboration Playbook: A leaders' guide to cross-sector collaboration
- Cross-sector collaboration in the UK: The leaders' view


In a world that's been dominated by the short-term, we give leaders the space to think long-term about improving growth and prosperity.

Through WIG, the leaders of today and tomorrow can engage in strategic dialogue and develop the capabilities needed to collaborate across sectors on complex policy problems – finding new solutions for the common good.



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