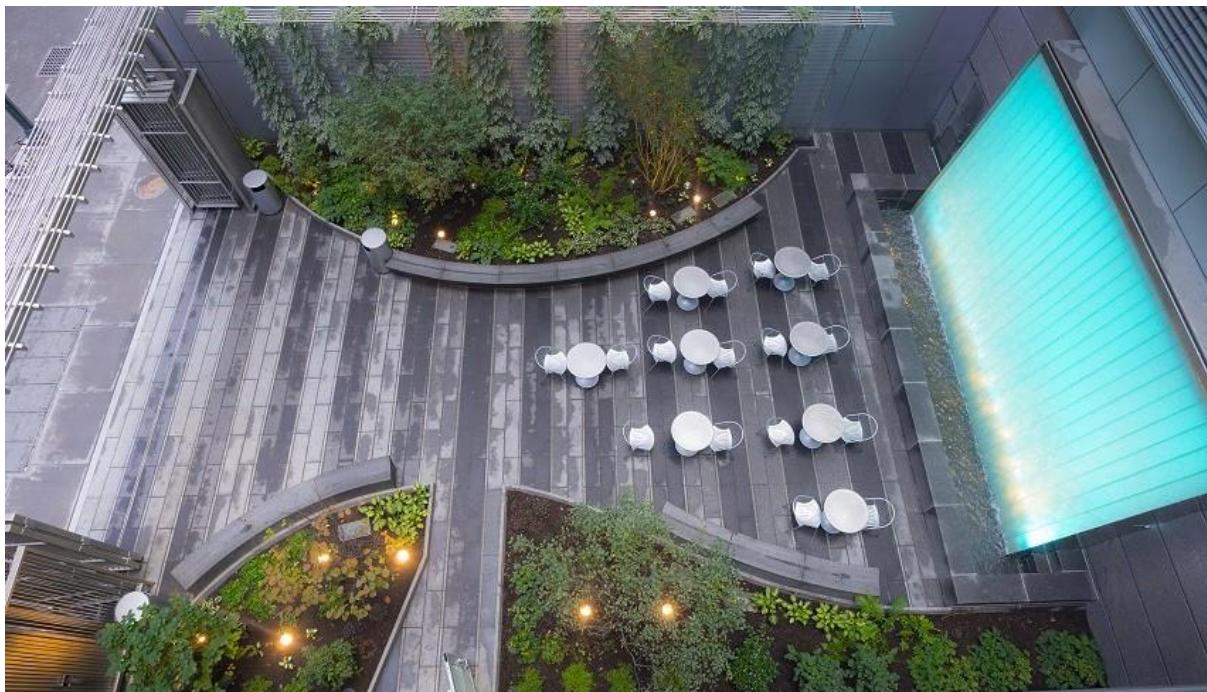**Four things you should know about Design-Thinking**

GI explains how it forms solutions around user needs.

By Charlene Chin

What is the best design in the world? Is it a stealth jet, or a supermarket trolley that doesn't wobble? The answer is simple: it depends on who you're designing something for.

Good design is about making every part of a service work better for people. This is particularly true for public services. Like every other object, they must be carefully designed to ensure they are effective.

The process of creating user-centric services is called Design Thinking, and GovInsider has explained the four things all officials need to know about this growing area of interest.

1. What is design-thinking?

Design-thinking is an approach to problem-solving that places the needs of its users at the centre. While traditional approaches start with a problem to solve, this principle puts it on reverse: it starts by asking users what they need, and then devises a strategy from there.

The process is typically split into a few stages:
1. Observing user behaviour
2. Identifying the problem
3. Testing new approaches in short pilots
4. Launching the plan
5. Continuing to tweak it based on observation and user feedback.

Projects may loop back through these steps, as teams refine their ideas and explore new directions. This means that while there is a rough guideline to follow, there are no hard and fast rules.

2. Why is this important?

Christian Bason, Chief Executive of the Danish Design Centre, believes that the older way of crafting policies – consultation, launch, evaluation – is outdated. "Design is about offering a set of approaches... that is fit for the type of complex reality that [officials] are facing", he said in a recent interview.

Design-thinking works well in solving complex problems – especially ones where government can't afford to halt systems to trial new experiments. "Switching off healthcare or the financial system while redesigning a new order from the outside-in" isn't viable, the UNDP's Global Centre for Public Service Excellence (GCPSE) writes. "Public sector innovation must ultimately be built amidst and within the old."

GCPSE says that key to service design is bringing together the affected community. This is true in healthcare as it is in tackling climate change.

This helps create more human-centred solutions, rather than one-size-fits-all policies. "The way we have been working in the past – where we design for the average citizen – will no longer suffice," said Andy Hue, then Design Lead at the Singapore's Public Service Division, in an interview with Challenge Magazine. Policy and service delivery should consider the different needs of citizens.

3. How is design-thinking affecting government?
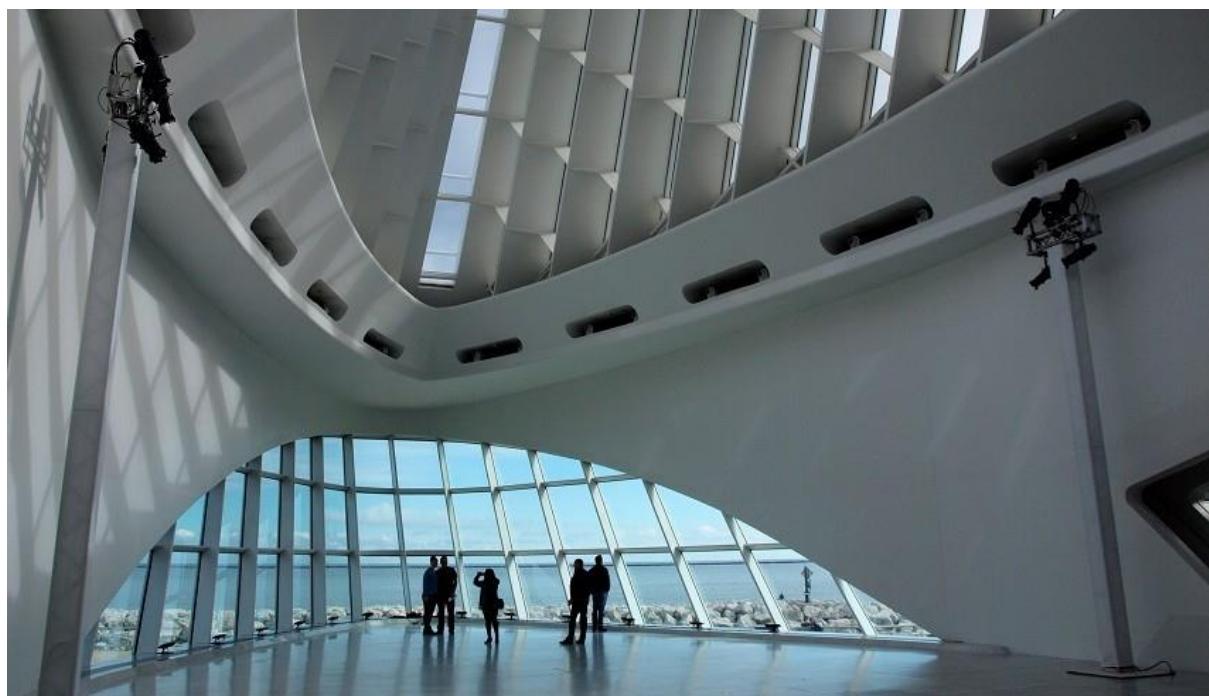
If government official used design-thinking more frequently, they could improve efficiency and service delivery.Take how Kaiser Permanente, America's nonprofit health care provider re-designed its nurses' schedules.

Kaiser devised software that allowed nurses to access and update patient information throughout their shifts, rather than at set times. The result was more accurate knowledge of their patients, resulting in shorter prep times and better care. As a nurse told the Harvard Business Review, "I'm an hour ahead, and I've only been here 45 minutes."

Design-thinking principles can also shape the image of a government to its public. Singapore's Ministry of Manpower (MOM) revamped its Employment Pass Services Centre to set a cordial tone, by changing the layout and improving service delivery. Visitors are greeted by a concierge in a spacious hall; open cabins have replaced interview rooms; toys are available for foreigners with families; visitors are always called up by name – not their queue number. As the service is the first point of contact for foreigners working in the country, this could mould the way outsiders view the nation state.

It also drastically cut waiting times by using an online appointment system. 95% of visitors are attended to within 15 minutes, and 90% within 10 minutes. The centre scored 5.7 out of 6 in its first customer satisfaction survey in 2010.

4. What is happening across the region on this?

Taipei has been teaching design-thinking to departmental heads since 2012. The city government holds design workshops and brainstorming sessions with designers and professionals. Taipei has outlined two approaches to broaden participation: a "top-down" approach where city government agencies work with designers to plan policies that prioritise user needs, and a "bottom-up" approach that encourages private sector organisations to propose innovative solutions to urban issues.

Down under, the Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) is a non-profit that works with government, philanthropies and the private sector to tackle societal issues. The organisation focuses on problems faced by families, the elderly and indigenous Australians.

Seoul's Innovation Bureau works across departments and engages its citizens in early planning of projects. "When a project is beyond what a department can handle, a variety of alternatives emerge and cooperation with the private sector, in particular, creates synergy", Hyo Gwan Jun , Director-General of the Seoul Innovation Bureau told GovInsider.

So far, it has rolled out multiple sharing schemes: students looking for accomodation get to live with elderly with spare rooms; small libraries are set up in apartments so neighbours can share reading material; and job seekers get to loan suits from experienced professionals who provide advice and guidance.

This year, the bureau will launch a living lab to test solutions for complex problems like unemployment, healthcare and the property prices displacing the poor. Ideas will be tested through on-site experiments, pilot projects, workshops and conferences.

Governments are borrowing design principles, and are using them to improve delivery. Good design can be anything – and should be applied to everything, it seems.