A Handbook for Sprint Research Projects

The Agile Initiative | April 2026

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1. Introduction

This handbook was originally created as part of the Agile Initiative to help research leads on Agile Initiative 'Sprint' projects to manage this expedited model of solutions-focused research. The following version is designed for those wishing to adopt the Agile Sprint approach for transdisciplinary research projects to address time-critical policy-relevant questions.

What is a Sprint?

A Sprint is a rapid research project to provide solutions grounded in academic research to time-critical policy issues. It is co-created with relevant stakeholders from inception of the idea to implementation of the Sprint project. As policy issues incorporate a broad spectrum of concerns, Sprint projects rely on bringing together the interdisciplinary expertise to answer the research question and generate policy-relevant solutions.

Sprints demonstrate the following characteristics:

Policy pull and interdisciplinary solution need

- Clear policy and/or practice challenge to which interdisciplinary research could provide a solution, framed as a research question
- Primary research component designed to generate evidence supporting the policy-relevant solution
- Targeted stakeholders interested in using the research, such as government, business, non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

Timeliness

- An identified policy or practice need and opportunity for use within a defined period
- Clear goal with potential for early outcomes and impact during the Sprint

Co-creation

- Inclusive and accessible approach to co-creation with stakeholders and external partners, and collaboration from conceptualisation through to impact
- Close engagement with the relevant institutional and departmental administrators to shape the Sprint and support its progress

Interdisciplinarity

- Interdisciplinary team of academics and practitioners, as appropriate to the question, to tackle the research
- Explanation of the nature of the interdisciplinarity required to answer the question and how it will work in practice

Commitment to inclusion and positive equality impact

- Advancement of goals related to equality, diversity and inclusion (within the funder and institutional focus)
- Commitment to delivering on the Researcher Concordat and Charter for the Career Development of Researchers
- Evaluation of potential positive and negative effects and unintended consequences of proposed research for different groups, as well as plans for action and ongoing monitoring (Equality Impact Assessment aligned with stakeholder mapping and plans for engagement)

A Sprint might be connected in some way to a larger portfolio of research. Once fully designed with stakeholders, Sprints should be stand-alone projects that meet all the core Sprint criteria.

The size and nature of the team, the timeframe required to deliver the Sprint, and the budget will depend on the research question and the policy imperative. The Sprint might last a few months or up to a year, including all phases of the research from inception through to results and early outcomes/impact.

2. Administration

This section outlines the parameters Sprint teams need to adhere to, that should be cross-referenced with the funder's award guidance, and communications guidance from your institution.

Administrative guidance

Managing progress

Sprint teams are encouraged to set up regular team meetings, to which research support colleagues can be invited when needed. It is a good idea to have a designated 'coordinator' role within the Sprint to manage regular meetings, engagement activities, and Sprint project management.

Milestone meetings with research support colleagues should be arranged to track and discuss progress against original objectives, and where potential changes might need to be introduced. At a minimum, there should be inception, mid-point, and final review meetings. These can also be the source of update reports to the funders and any institutional governance managing the Sprint. For longer Sprints, such as those lasting a year, it can be helpful to have lighter touch milestone check-ins at the three- and nine-month points, too.

Communications

Create a Sprint webpage to help with engagement and news stories that can share and contextualise outputs and key learning points from research activities. It is also worth producing templates for PowerPoint presentations and research posters to help with 'brand' recognition for your Sprint. Setting up a LinkedIn profile for your Sprint can also help with wider academic and stakeholder engagement.

Regular stakeholder events

Ongoing co-creation to ensure policy relevance is crucial for Sprint projects. Depending on the geographical reach of your core stakeholder group, these can be held online if needed. These events help to create cohesion, knowledge exchange and a sense of shared endeavour around your Sprint project as well as shaping the research. Use regular stakeholder engagement to share indicative findings in their most accessible form with your stakeholder group to demonstrate progress and relevance, so that stakeholders can easily update their respective colleagues and institutions. Your stakeholder group will be instrumental for the dissemination and uptake of outputs and key learning points from your Sprint, so regular ongoing engagement should be built into the project timeline.

Impact

Plan from the outset how you intend to monitor and evaluate your outcomes and early impacts during the Sprint. This is most easily done by creating a theory of change that underpins the core objectives/goal and can generate bespoke 'indicators' for your research and create a framework for reporting back to your governance and funders. Targeted communications and leveraging support from your stakeholders are key for helping outputs achieve impact – remember that the research cannot be relied on to speak for itself, it needs to be concise, actionable and written with the needs and reading style of the target audience in mind. It is also worth planning engagement activities with tangible desired outcomes in mind, that you can then follow up via your stakeholders' organisations.

Budget

Most higher education institutions are not well set up for interdisciplinary research as departments generally manage their own budgets. This means that Sprint leads and co-investigators from other disciplines will need to check the remaining budget allocation with their respective departments on a regular basis, as well as liaising with the department within the institution that has been awarded the funding for the Sprint project and is responsible for allocating funds to the contributing departments.

EDI

Scale and embed equality, diversity and inclusion considerations in the Sprint from start to finish, including stakeholder engagement, research planning, co-creation, implementation and impact, knowledge dissemination, team recruitment, and career development. It is advisable to use the Agile Initiative's Equality Impact Assessment for research prior to Sprint inception to ensure that all the factors listed above have EDI considerations baked into them, along with mitigation plans for unintended consequences from the research and engagement activities. You should also use your institution's guidance resources for accessible communications and events.

Capacity building and training

As part of your institution's commitment to the Researcher Concordat, you should be mindful that short-term contracts for rapid research projects can limit access to training and career development time unless it is designed into your Sprint. You will need to ensure all team members are aware they are part of a Sprint project and its difference to 'standard' research projects. It can be beneficial to run a bespoke Sprint induction for those hired onto Sprints including signposting to other training and development resources available through your institution. Early career researchers (ECRs) will need time within their working week to attend training and career development opportunities, including time with the Sprint lead to discuss how best to position their Sprint research in future applications. They will also benefit from communications and policy engagement training at the start of the Sprint if they are not familiar with policy-oriented research.

Data management

Your institution and funder will require a data management plan (DMP) for the research data and models that are likely to be generated from your research. This needs to be completed within the first three months of your Sprint project, using a template provided by your funder and guidance from your institution.

Timeframe

Initial co-creation with stakeholders, team recruitment, and identification of any external collaborators needed for the Sprint will usually have happened before the formal start of the Sprint and inception meeting. Formal extensions to the Sprint timeframe and researcher contracts will have to be approved by your institution and/or funder, with a compelling case made, such as a forthcoming event to help influence policy, or more time to generate key outputs. Good Sprint research design should not overload the time available and incorporate the time needed for outputs within the project management.

Monitoring progress

It is recommended that Sprint teams develop Gantt work plan, theory of change, risk register and Equality Impact Assessment for the full proposal; these should be revisited and updated as necessary at the start of the Sprint. These are tools that can be updated throughout the Sprint to reflect changes in the context as the Sprint progresses.

All Sprint team members will be expected to join the milestone meetings to review progress and any potential changes needed against objectives, milestones, and work plan, and to be part of the discussion that will inform reporting back to the Sprint's governance and funders.

Attribution

Sprints need to ensure all outputs and outcomes are attributed to the funder and institution. If Sprints are located within a wider research portfolio, the funder needs to see evidence of added value to research results from their funding. Outputs must have the correct funder grant attribution.

Publications and outputs

Publications and other forms of media communication, including media appearances, press releases, conferences, and slide decks for engagement presentations must acknowledge the funding. You will need to agree set wording for the attribution with your institution and funders at the outset.

If your funder is part of UKRI, Sprints need to adhere to the UKRI research publications open access (OA) policy: Making your research publications open access – UKRI. Sprints are encouraged to target pre-print friendly journals to enable quick dissemination. You should refer to your institution's OA guidance, and any arrangements they have relating to associated publishing costs (APCs). Use the Journal Checker Tool to determine target journal funder and institutional compliance.

The Sprint model is geared towards non-traditional outputs (i.e., communications in accessible formats targeted in language and style at towards the primary audience). Many policy professionals still rely on peer-reviewed academic articles as being the 'gold standard' for evidence. In an ideal world, your main non-traditional output should be supported by a link to the peer-reviewed paper (or pre-print) to demonstrate the academic rigour underpinning the user-friendly output.

3. Equality, diversity and inclusion

This section outlines commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), how to think about it in terms of your Sprint, and the Equality Impact Assessment.

Overview

Equality, diversity and inclusion is embedded in the Sprints. Considerations about EDI are relevant to research and engagement activities, outputs, recruitment practices, and team conduct and dynamics. To embed diversity and inclusion into all your Sprint activities, you should strive to create a culture within your Sprint team that challenges prejudice, ensures fairness, and welcomes difference.

Equality, diversity and inclusion in Sprint research

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) comes into Sprint research planning, design, implementation and impact, stakeholder engagement, knowledge dissemination, and team recruitment and career development. This includes engaging with groups with protected characteristics as defined in the Equality Act 2010:

- Age
- Gender reassignment
- Being married / in a civil partnership
- Being pregnant / on maternity leave
- Disability
- Race, including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin
- Religion / belief
- Sex
- Sexual orientation

Where possible, please also consider parenting/caring responsibilities, people who work part-time, and socio-economic status.

How to apply EDI to your Sprint

A successful Sprint will embed equality, diversity and inclusion throughout the project. Use the questions in the sections below as prompts to consider how to prioritise inclusion throughout your Sprint research. You do not need to answer every question or meet the needs of every group based on their protected characteristics. The goal is to understand the specific equality, diversity and inclusion context for your research and tailor your Sprint accordingly.

The considerations and examples in the sections below are adapted from [best practices in EDI] in research practice and design by the Government of Canada.

Impact and scope

- What kind of outcomes/impact does your Sprint team want to see regarding diversity and inclusion?

For example: shifting towards a more inclusive culture within the research team, expanding the applicability of research findings to a wider range of stakeholders, supporting research outcomes that fairly benefit communities most affected by the research.

- What is the scale of the research (local, regional, national, international)? What relevant EDI issues are present in that context?

For example: disproportionate access to greenspace by predominantly white neighbourhoods versus neighbourhoods with a marginalised racial/ethnic population.

- Who can potentially benefit from the research? Does it include a diverse range of stakeholders with different protected characteristics?
- Are there any groups who may experience unintended negative impacts? Who are the groups? Do they have protected characteristics or specific socio-economic status?
- Is there an opportunity to disaggregate data? Disaggregating the data may help you understand how some groups may be more or less affected than others based on protected characteristics.

Co-creation and stakeholder engagement

- Who has the experience, relationships, and know-how to engage with high-level decision-makers? Who does not?
- How can the co-creation process include marginalised groups/voices that may not currently have access to government engagement or other high-level decision-making?
- Who else is addressing the Sprint research question and could benefit from getting 'in the room' with government stakeholders and other high-level decision-makers?

Interdisciplinarity

- How can interdisciplinary research facilitate the inclusion of more diverse or marginalised researchers and communities?
- Are there departments that have more diverse researchers who could offer valuable perspectives/experience/methodologies?

- Has the research included and/or referenced a range of sources in primary and secondary research? For example:
    - Community consultation, authors from marginalised groups or researchers who use critical theories such as anti-colonial theory, feminist theory, etc.
- Are there disciplines with other strengths that could improve the Sprint's diversity and inclusion activities, e.g. community-engaged research?

Knowledge dissemination

- Can the research findings and outputs be disseminated to help particular groups to achieve their goals?
- What outputs best suit the needs/goals of the different stakeholder groups impacted by your research? Have accessibility considerations been made?

Sprint team recruitment and career development

- How do the different identities on the team inform their experience (or lack of experience) with systemic barriers? Are these different between the Sprint lead and the team?
- Whose perspectives/experiences are missing from the team? If they cannot be included via recruitment, can you find relevant external stakeholders?
- Does the Sprint team have guidelines or a code of conduct guiding how they work together?
- How will the roles and responsibilities for equality, diversity and inclusion be delegated and shared across the team?
- Do team meeting times and locations consider the needs of the different team members? For example, those with accessibility requirements or caring responsibilities?
- Are there ECRs on the team? How can the Sprint advance their career goals?

The Sprint Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

The EIA evaluates the potential positive and negative impacts of Sprint research on different groups. This includes members of the Sprint team and your stakeholders. Before completing your EIA, it is advisable to first read the questions and prompts in the above section. We strongly recommend aligning the EIA with your stakeholder mapping and plans for stakeholder engagement (see: Stakeholder mapping and Stakeholder engagement in Engagement and impact).

Why conduct an EIA

Completing an EIA is not currently a legal requirement in England but is endorsed by many funders and helps fulfil your institution's Public Sector Equality Duty. The EIA process also helps enhance diversity and inclusion in Sprints and ensures that Sprint research does not directly or indirectly discriminate against any groups based on their protected characteristics. By completing an EIA for your Sprint, you can make sure that Sprint research processes are fair and do not present barriers to participation.

When to conduct an EIA

An EIA must be conducted during the design and development of a Sprint and submitted as part of the full proposal. It is, however, a living document. Therefore, it should be regularly reviewed during milestone meetings and updated to ensure continuous monitoring and evaluation of equality issues.

What is included in the scope of the EIA

The EIA is grounded in the principles of the Equality Act, 2010. In practical terms, the EIA covers activities carried out during the Sprint's lifespan, including research planning, design, implementation and impact, stakeholder engagement, knowledge dissemination, and team and career development.

How to engage with the EIA process

The EIA process should be integral to Sprint planning and monitoring to ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion are proactively managed. Listed below are the process steps:

1. **Identify impacts:** use the EIA to identify potential positive and negative impacts on different groups based on their protected and other characteristics. Consider the members of your team and stakeholders.
2. **Prioritise inclusion:** encourage the integration of diversity and inclusion priorities throughout the Sprint.
3. **Action planning:** develop actions to mitigate any negative impacts and promote positive impacts identified during the assessment.
4. **Documentation:** document the findings and actions taken.
5. **Review:** regularly revisit the EIA to adapt to project or external changes in the Sprint context. It should be reviewed at the mid-point and at any point major changes to the Sprint are proposed.

The EIA process should be integral to Sprint planning and monitoring to ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion are embedded in the project and proactively managed.

4. Engagement and impact

Sprints are driven by the need to deliver policy-relevant impact. This section charts the relationship between ongoing co-creation, engagement, communications, and primary outputs with this overarching goal in mind.

Stakeholder engagement

Ongoing co-creation and stakeholder engagement start from the approval to proceed to development of the full Sprint proposal and then continues throughout the Sprint's timeline. It involves researchers working closely with policy partners, stakeholders, and external partners/collaborators throughout the Sprint to ensure the research and outputs offer solutions to the policy need that will translate into policy and academic impact.

What are stakeholders?

Sprint stakeholders are the groups or individuals whose interests are affected positively or negatively by the Sprint. In turn, stakeholder interests can influence the Sprint. Sprint stakeholders can have a variety of attitudes, levels of influence and interest. Sprint stakeholders can include but are not limited to:

- Recipients of Sprint interventions/research
- Partner organisations, both governmental and non-governmental (including academic)
- Organisations and individuals that contribute knowledge and networks
- Sprint team members
- Regulatory bodies, national and international
- Local authorities, national and local government
- The media and the general public
- Social, political, and religious groups
- Your funder, institution and governance.

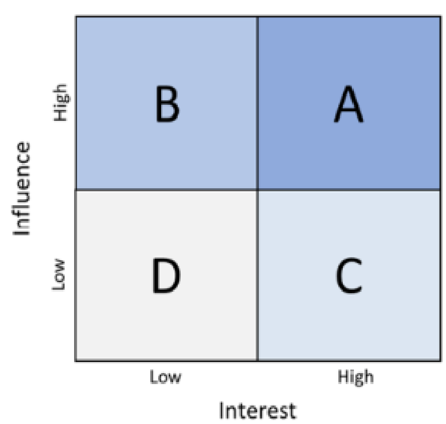
Stakeholder mapping

Sprints will have identified and started to work with their key stakeholders in the pre-proposal co-creation stage. However, an important part of starting to work together as a Sprint team is to go through the Sprint's theory of change and projected impacts to think about which other stakeholders should be involved. This can reflect a policy need that affects various levels of scale (local, regional, national, international) or multiple perspectives from different organisations/communities to round out the policy impact.

It is important to note that your definition of stakeholders should include those who may experience potential positive and/or negative effects from the research and/or policy. Be sure to consider your different stakeholders during the completion of your EIA. Aligning stakeholder mapping with the EIA allows your team to evaluate the interests, influence and experiences of different groups and how those may vary depending on their protected and other characteristics. This approach aims to support comprehensive, inclusive stakeholder mapping and engagement throughout your Sprint. It can then be useful to think about stakeholder's impact on the Sprint in terms of interest and involvement. You could assign categories of affect from A (high affect), B (medium-high), C (medium-low) to D (low affect) and translate this onto a table.

Stakeholder	Influence	Influence type	Interest	Interest type	Affect category
Defra	High	Policy	High	Outputs	A
Beneficiaries	High	Benefits	Low	Participation	B

This can then be mapped onto a grid:



[Both examples above taken from PM4DEV®, Project Management for Development Organizations (4th Edition, 2022)]

In terms of engagement and relationship strategy, category A can then be seen as work with directly, B as nurture interest and capacity, C as challenge or persuade, and D as monitor.

Stakeholder engagement

As the Sprint progresses, it is likely that you will identify further relevant stakeholders at different levels of scale, for example, from local government, and NGOs. Stakeholders who were not involved from the outset will need to be brought up to speed. If new stakeholders are engaged during the implementation of your Sprint, please update your EIA as needed.

Duty of care

If you are engaging with communities with relevant lived experience, such as patients or marginalised groups, there is an extra level of duty of care in stakeholder engagement. Depending on your Sprint plans, you may need to submit an ethical approval application for research within your institution involving human participants and personal data. This can take time, so try to submit the application immediately after approval of the Sprint proposal. It is vital such groups are fully involved, informed, and feel part of a collaborative process.

Communications-based engagement

Stakeholder relationships tend to stay with individual researchers. However, one of the advantages of a Sprint is facilitating stakeholder connections that otherwise would not occur. Therefore, you need to factor in group communication and engagement as well as existing individual relationship management. One way to do this outside of stakeholder workshops is to set up a social media channel such as Slack for the Sprint team which stakeholders can join. If you are planning to produce a newsletter for your stakeholders, please liaise your institution's communications team, and best practice guidance in line with general data protection regulation (GDPR).

Stakeholder workshops

Sprint teams are strongly advised to invite key stakeholders to the Sprint's inception workshop. This aids shared understanding and helps with plotting pathways to impact. In addition to ongoing communication with stakeholders, Sprint teams should aim to hold regular stakeholder workshops. These can help manage any changes to the policy context, refine outputs and dissemination plans, and facilitate knowledge exchange based on sharing plans, indicative results and drawing on stakeholder expertise.

Workshops should be made as inclusive as possible, and respect time and geographical constraints. If this means that you need to hold hybrid stakeholder meetings, we advise you find a venue that is optimised for hybrid meetings, and that lunch/refreshments are provided for in-person attendees. Some Sprints may work with one key stakeholder in a specific location. In these instances, you might want to consider holding workshops at the stakeholder's location.

Communicating your research during the Sprint

Regular Sprint communications outputs help to maintain the visibility of your Sprint with your stakeholders. We recommend that you aim to produce blogs/news items for your Sprint's webpage after presenting on your Sprint at conferences, stakeholder engagement workshops, stakeholder testimonials, or when your Sprint research has generated indicative results and/or early outputs.

If your Sprint is within the ecosystem of another research programme it is important to ensure that all relevant communications attribute the Sprint-relevant aspects.

At the Sprint mid-point, examine any changes to the Sprint context. If there have been significant changes that affect your Sprint trajectory, then remember to update the Sprint webpage accordingly.

Amplifying the reach of your early outputs

Communications outputs can help to create a narrative of your Sprint's journey and help to support early impacts. It is important to share early outputs with your stakeholders to bolster communications support, and to keep a record of who is on that circulation list. It is easiest to first upload the output to your Sprint webpage and create the accompanying news item with the hyperlink to the output so that you can circulate it as a link.

Most MPs find policy information via newspapers, LinkedIn and to a diminishing degree, X (Twitter), so communications to support outputs are key. Communication is more trackable for impact than outputs alone, which will be one source of influence amongst other evidence.

Planning for impact

Sprints aim for policy impact related to the Sprint's policy pull. Depending on the breadth of your Sprint, this will be at various levels of scale and involve a variety of organisations. At the national level, bear in mind that government does not attribute evidence to specific research programmes in policy-relevant documents, including Hansard. Therefore, you will need to source impact testimonials directly from any government stakeholders at the national level on the usefulness and planned use of the Sprint evidence. Use of Overton and Policy Commons can help to identify policy influence, mainly via citations to outputs.

Civil servants in key departments are always better stakeholder targets than MPs, who are generally too busy to engage directly with research. This principle can also be applied to local government, NGOs, and other organisations – who is the right person to engage with who has availability, relevant policy/subject knowledge, and capacity to disseminate findings within their organisation? Not-for-profit organisations and private sector companies are often happy to cite the source of the research information and say how they have or plan to deploy the findings in their organisation. It can be useful to have a transparent conversation about this during inception meetings and stakeholder workshops.

Once you get underway and refine your work plan, it is useful to start thinking about the relationships between outputs and the desired outcomes, and what kinds of communications activities would best facilitate impact (see the 'Planning for impact' grid below).

Planning for impact grid

	SHORT TERM (< 1 year)	**LONGER TERM (> 1 year)**
High certainty	Early outputs Outcomes 1. Tangible 2. Intangible Comms activities to facilitate impact	Primary outputs Outcomes 1. Tangible 2. Intangible Comms activities to facilitate impact
Lower certainty	Early outputs Outcomes 1. Tangible 2. Intangible Comms activities to facilitate impact	Primary outputs Outcomes 1. Tangible 2. Intangible Comms activities to facilitate impact

High certainty can relate to direct policy relevance. An example of a high certainty early output might be responding to a call for written evidence or policy brief underpinned by Sprint findings on a particular aspect relating to the policy pull. Lower certainty could relate to a think piece on the policy context (such as an article for *The Conversation*). High and low certainty can also relate to and inform prioritisation (lower certainty of producing certain outputs during the Sprint timeline, for example).

'Tangible' relates to evidence that is objective and relatively easy to quantify. 'Intangible' is often just as important, but harder to objectively evidence, such as influencing opinions and behaviours.

Planning your primary outputs

All planned outputs should have impact in mind. Non-traditional outputs are more valuable than academic papers on their own. As previously flagged, the optimum formulation for impact is to plan to submit an academic paper to a pre-print friendly journal in advance of the primary non-traditional output, so that it can be hyperlinked within the primary output to demonstrate the evidence has a verifiable, peer-reviewed source.

If primary outputs are not based on peer-reviewed published evidence, it needs to be transparent that the output is based on informed opinion. If your Sprint is planning to produce a rapid data analysis (when findings are needed quickly to inform practice), it will need a robust internal review and sign-off.

Many policymakers still rely on peer-reviewed academic journal papers as the gold-standard for evidence. However, they need this information quickly, so all Sprints are advised to target pre-print friendly OA journals. Ideally, these should be accompanied by easy to digest summaries. When asked, policymakers have stated that they find policy briefs and rapid data analysis that presents statistical evidence clearly through infographics most useful.

Disseminating your outputs

As with circulating early outputs, it is imperative you retain a dissemination list (names and organisations) for your outputs. Otherwise, you will not be able to monitor impacts effectively. It is best if the outputs are disseminated by the Sprint team, as stakeholders are more likely to remember the names of Sprint researchers than any professional services staff involved in the Sprint.

End of Sprint webinars

Holding a webinar at the end of your Sprint for your stakeholders (and other potential end-users or interested parties) is an effective way to share your research findings more widely, and to highlight outputs or forthcoming outputs to a broader audience.

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