

Beyond speed: Designing science–policy collaborations that work with real-world rhythms

Mark Hirons, Joe S Boyle, Peter Barbrook-Johnson, Jennifer Dodsworth, John Lynch, Rachel Hayman, Nat Seddon



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About this brief: *This brief accompanies a research paper examining how science–policy collaborations unfold in practice. It draws on in-depth qualitative research conducted within the Agile Initiative at the University of Oxford, translating key insights into practical guidance for researchers, funders, programme designers, and practitioners.*

Summary

- Rapid, responsive science is essential for addressing urgent policy challenges.
- In practice, science–policy work is shaped by multiple, interacting timelines that do not always align.
- Effective collaboration depends not only on speed, but on how these timelines are aligned, adapted, and navigated.
- Designing collaborations with these dynamics in mind can improve both impact and sustainability of science–policy engagement.

The Agile Initiative: a new model for rapid science–policy engagement

The Agile Initiative is an interdisciplinary research programme based at the University of Oxford, established with a £10 million grant from the UK Natural Environment Research Council (NERC). It was designed to experiment with ways to strengthen how science informs policy by delivering **fast-paced, solution-oriented research** on pressing environmental challenges.

At its core are short-term research projects – known as “Sprints” – where the funded research period is typically 6–15 months. These bring together researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to address **time-critical policy questions**, with the aim of feeding evidence directly into decision-making processes in real time.

The Agile Initiative represents an important and innovative step forward in:

- accelerating interdisciplinary research
- strengthening collaboration between science and policy
- and shifting research culture towards more **impact-focused, demand-led approaches**

This brief builds on insights from studying these projects in practice, with a focus on how rapid, policy-engaged research unfolds across different timelines.

Agile researchers at a partner impact workshop



The opportunity: building momentum for faster science

There is growing recognition of the need to strengthen the role of science in policy, particularly in response to urgent systemic challenges linked to climate change and biodiversity loss. Initiatives such as Agile demonstrate the potential value of more rapid, responsive, and policy-engaged research.

At the same time, speed alone does not determine success. Science–policy collaborations unfold across multiple interacting timelines — from policy, funding and organisational cycles to the biographical rhythms of the people involved. These timelines are shaped by changing circumstances and do not always align, creating practical challenges for how projects are staffed, organised and adapted.

The opportunity, therefore, is to **build on advances in speed and responsiveness**, while also recognising and working with this broader temporal complexity.

Working with multiple rhythms

Science–policy collaborations operate across multiple interacting rhythms, often shaped by external events and institutional cycles beyond a project’s control. These rhythms do not always align. Three key dynamics shape how they can be navigated in practice:

Entrainment: aligning timelines

Alignment between research, policy and organisational timelines is often partial and temporary. Regular interaction can create repeated opportunities for alignment, helping projects respond to shifting priorities without simply requiring research to move faster.

Improvisation: adapting in real time

Effective projects frequently rely on the ability to adapt—responding to new policy developments, staffing changes, and emerging opportunities. When supported, this adaptability can enhance responsiveness and creativity.

Rhythmic competence: working skilfully with time

Successful collaborations depend on the ability to recognise and navigate multiple timelines. This includes awareness, strategic decision-making, and the coordination of people and activities over time.



In practice, these multiple rhythms, and their interactions, are not always anticipated in project design, but encountered as projects unfold and navigated with differing degrees of effectiveness. The result can be messy and stressful. More deliberate attention to these rhythms can help projects navigate this complexity more effectively. Our research highlights the particular challenges, risks and practical responses for different actors.

Key implications for practice

Actor	Key temporal/ rhythmic challenges	Key risks	What helps (in practice)
Early Career Researchers (ECRs)	Short contracts; high pressure to deliver quickly; limited influence over project direction; need to balance outputs (papers vs policy engagement)	Stress and burnout; reduced research quality; limited long-term impact or career benefit; key outputs undelivered, working out of contract or left out of final outputs	Clear and continuous scoping in collaboration with PI; setting realistic expectations that account for rhythms; support for navigating policy engagement and balancing with academic outputs; opportunities to build relationships and visibility
Mid-Career Researchers (MCRs)	Balancing project leadership, delivery, and career progression; managing interdisciplinary teams and timelines	Stress and burnout from growth in competing priorities and responsibilities (personal and professional); overload from coordination and administrative demands and responsibilities; difficulty sustaining both academic and policy outputs/identity	Flexibility in project design; dedicated support and advice for team coordination and project management; recognition of leadership and facilitation roles
Senior Career Researchers (SCRs)	Navigating multiple roles (strategic, advisory, academic); aligning projects with broader policy and funding landscapes	Time constraints reduce effective project engagement and management, risk to delivery; missed opportunities to build relationships, mentor and distribute influence and opportunity; pushing pressures and responsibilities downwards (to administrative and research teams)	Dedicated, funded time on projects; deliberate actions to leverage networks to address challenges and risks; support on project management, strategic engagement with policy timelines; prioritising supporting others' development
Research Funders	Operating across short- and long-term funding horizons while priorities, organisations and personnel change; responding to changing policy needs with constrained capacity;	Loss of tacit knowledge and programme vision; underinvestment in coordination, relationships and continuity; long-term investments becoming misaligned with changing priorities.	Flexible funding structures that allow adaptation to changing needs and institutional cycles; involving policymakers and practitioners in programme governance to maintain alignment with evolving priorities; review and evaluation processes that capture learning and inform future investments.

Actor	Key temporal/ rhythmic challenges	Key risks	What helps (in practice)
Policy/non-academic partners and collaborators	Priorities shaped by unpredictable political and organisational change; limited time to engage with research; need for timely, usable evidence; high staff turnover	Research questions, approaches or outputs that are poorly aligned with policy needs; limited uptake despite relevance; loss of continuity in relationships	Ongoing engagement rather than one-off inputs; early co-development of research questions and shared vocabularies; iterative communication; effective handover processes
Universities (administrative)	Misalignment between funding, financial, recruitment and project cycles; conventional administrative processes can struggle with rapid or unpredictable changes	Delays in project start-up and ability to pivot; stress and pressures on administrators from compressed timelines; pressure to reshape activity around administrative rather than policy needs; administrators often don't have the breadth of skills, experience and guidance to mitigate challenges	Flexible mechanisms for moving and managing funds; enabling rapid deployment of existing staff and expertise; proportionate HR, finance and contracting processes designed for short, adaptive projects; building resilient teams and processes through diversity and flexibility
Universities (strategic)	Research funding, assessment, employment and reward systems often favour disciplinary outputs and conventional project cycles, making it difficult to mobilise people and resources around emerging policy needs	Interdisciplinary and policy-engaged research is disincentivised; researchers remain tied to individual grants and disciplinary career paths; opportunities for rapid policy engagement are missed	Recognise and reward interdisciplinary and policy-engaged work; create flexible career and staffing models; invest in cross-institutional research support; provide flexible funding that can cross disciplinary and organisational boundaries

This brief is a first iteration. We welcome feedback and insights from practice to help refine these recommendations as we continue to learn about how different actors navigate the rhythms of science–policy collaboration.

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agile@oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk
mark.hirons@ouce.ox.ac.uk



<https://www.agile-initiative.ox.ac.uk/>



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