

Our approach to Managing rapid research projects

This document offers learning from the Agile Initiative for researchers, research facilitators, administrators, and others interested in managing fast-paced, policy-facing research.

Why should you care about how to manage a research project?

Rapid, policy-focused, interdisciplinary research creates particular management challenges. While some academic research leads or principal investigators might have a professional administrator costed into their project budget or have access to support from professional staff in their institutions, this is not always the case. Therefore, leads on research projects often need to be project managers as well as researchers.

Agile actively supports researchers to lead Sprint projects who have less experience of complex research projects. We found that leads were often confronted with distinctive project management challenges that differed to experiences on other research projects.

This was due first to the **intensity of the research**, with the research timeframe compressed to deliver results and solutions quickly, requiring coordinated and interdisciplinary teamwork. A second issue was the **intensity of stakeholder engagement**, with research questions and outputs shaped by policy and practice needs.

Thirdly, teams have to produce a **variety of outputs** to directly address policy requirements. Policy briefs, presentations, workshops, or specific research products like software, websites, or spreadsheet tools may be the primary outputs while traditional research papers may be secondary outputs.

Therefore, if you are a researcher who is leading or managing a rapid, solutions-focused interdisciplinary project, it is well worth taking time to think through some of the management issues before you start. This includes work planning, human resources, team building, inclusivity, financial management, communications and time management.

Defining stakeholders

Agile works with many different stakeholders. Stakeholders in this series refers to non-academic groups who have an interest in, may be affected by, or hold relevant knowledge, rights or responsibilities in relation to the research. These may include policymakers, practitioners, civil society groups, private sector actors, Indigenous Peoples, communities, and other knowledge holders. The relevant groups will depend on the project context.

We use 'partners' to refer to key stakeholders who are named in the project agreement as co-creators, are active in the relevant policy space and have formally committed to being involved in the project.

A checklist for managing Sprint-style research

While leads of Agile Sprint research projects can use whatever systems and tools they prefer for their project management, we have identified a series of issues that warrant consideration.

A useful way to conceptualise this is using a checklist against the project timeline. This timeline is based on the Agile Sprint project lifecycle which included a co-design phase leading to a full proposal that was submitted for funding.

Before you start

During the design phase and ahead of the official start-date consider:

- **The team:** have you identified all team members and are they available to start when you need them? If you need to recruit or contract additional team members, line up human resources support to launch recruitment and contracting as soon you can. Make a contingency plan in case recruitment takes longer than expected.
- **The budget:** get support from finance administrators to help with the outline budget.
- **Collaborators:** line up support for concluding agreements and contracts with external partners, particularly if they are going to be funded through the project.
- **Stakeholder relationships:** during any gap between finalising the co-created proposal and starting the project, keep in contact with partners and stakeholders so that they are ready to go when needed.
- **Equality Impact Assessment (EIA):** complete an EIA and share with the final team.
- **Forward planning:** get provisional dates for initial meetings in the diary.
- **Reality check:** make sure your work plan is not overloaded and has flexibility built in for the unknowns.

In the initial stages

Agile Sprints work on a very tight timeframe. Teams need to mobilise quickly once funding is approved to get the research underway. Things to consider are:

- **Research approvals:** ensure you have ethics approval, access to data, and access to fieldwork sites and respondent groups. Ideally, begin this before the project formally starts, as delays in ethics approval or data access can quickly derail a short project timeline.
- **Data management and publication protocols:** clarify any requirements around making research data from the project openly accessible, particularly if it is funded by a public body. Make sure that all academic and non-academic partners agree on what will be published and how, and iron out any differences early. Establish non-disclosure agreements or memoranda of understanding, if necessary, and seek legal advice if there are any concerns.

- **Team building and cohesion:** set the tone for positive collaborative, interdisciplinary working through regular team meetings, information sharing platforms, co-working arrangements, and inclusive social time together. Ensure everyone feels supported and listened to, and that there is shared understanding of the goals.
- **Career development:** support short-term and early career researchers with career development training, while also giving them space to lead where they can and to advance their own research profile.
- **Ongoing co-creation:** establish clear ways of working and mutual expectations with key stakeholders. Be prepared to be flexible and creative, and to find ways to overcome differences of opinion.
- **Plan the outputs:** regularly review your plans for academic and non-academic outputs, delivering as many as possible during the project. Take advice on the best ways to communicate to policy and practitioner audiences.
- **Plan your events:** allow plenty of lead-in time for any larger events; get dates in diaries and ensure you know what needs to be done and by when to avoid last-minute hitches.
- **Manage your budget:** make sure you are getting information regularly about the spend and forecast for the whole project.
- **Monitor and report:** keep an eye on the workplan and goals to ensure you are on track; it can come as a shock when you realise that you're already halfway through after only a few months!

Towards the end

A good research project manager is always thinking about the end. Things to consider as the project advances towards its conclusion include:

- **Integrating findings and planning outputs:** it is not unusual for the research to become siloed as it progresses, so make time to bring everyone together and integrate the findings.
- **Final workshops:** share interim findings with stakeholders and organise final workshops to share results, celebrate achievements, and reflect on learning.
- **Wider dissemination:** create and implement a dissemination and communications plan.
- **Final reporting and administration:** ensure that you complete all financial and administrative reporting, including submitting data to public repositories as required by the funder.
- **Next destination for researchers:** help researchers on fixed term contracts to find their next role through career development support.

Beyond the Sprint

It is highly likely that researchers will still have outputs to finalise (especially academic papers) after the project formally ends. Things to be ready to manage include:

- **Further outputs:** think about who is going to complete work on any additional outputs, particularly if key researchers have finished their contracts and moved onto new activities. Who will maintain outputs, for example web-pages or access to online resources?
- **Impact monitoring:** you may have to report on the research impacts for some time after the funding ends.
- **Follow-on and spin-off research:** make sure the team is clear about protocols for building on the research in further work or grant proposals.
- **Maintaining relationships:** consider how to maintain relationships with partners and stakeholders after the project ends. Without the project to hold you together it can be hard to do this.

Managing disruptions and risks

In Agile, we always encourage teams to think about potential risks and mitigation measures during the design phase. Many Sprint projects had to deal with unexpected events. In a longer research project, there is time to address these. In a rapid research project, dealing with unexpected events can become stressful and challenging.

Common disruptions include:

- recruitment delays or early departures, especially where researchers are on short-term contracts
- pressure on work-life balance, including holidays, caring responsibilities, illness and personal issues
- changes in policy priorities, stakeholder availability or the external context
- delays in approvals, contracts, data access or partner agreements

These risks can be reduced through realistic planning, clear communication, contingency time, and strong formal and informal relationships with policy and practitioner stakeholders.

Top tips

These tips are based on learning from Agile, and our commitment to inclusive, collaborative and transparent research that will have long-term impact.

Recognise that managing a Sprint research project might require **different methods and skills** to previous research projects.

Encourage co-working among team members to strengthen collaboration, especially if they are engaging with new disciplines.

Build a **strong relationship with policy and practitioner** stakeholders through effective formal and informal communication channels.

Put in place mentoring and support for early career researchers (including yourself if this is the first research project of this nature you have managed).

Seek help and advice from professional research support staff.

Watch the timeline closely and be prepared to adapt. In a rapid project, delays and surprises can quickly affect what is achievable.

Resources

[Agile Initiative \(2026\) A Handbook for Sprint Research Projects. Agile Initiative, University of Oxford, UK.](#)

[Webinar Recording. "The Agile Initiative: Managing complex research projects". YouTube, 2024.](#)

About the Series

The “How to do a Sprint research project” series was produced in 2026 by the Agile Initiative at the Oxford Martin School, University of Oxford.

Agile aims to revolutionise how research responds to the urgent needs of policymakers on critical environmental issues through rapid research projects called Sprints.

The aim of this series is to provide guidance on how to run a Sprint research project in contexts outside of Agile, based on learning collated by the programme support team and researchers.

This document should be cited as:

The Agile Initiative, 2026. Our approach to managing rapid research projects. University of Oxford. Available online.

Other guides in the series include:

- Equality Impact Assessment
- Interdisciplinary research
- Co-creating research
- Theory of change in research

Available at <https://www.agile-initiative.ox.ac.uk/our-approach/>

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