

# Our approach to Co-creating research

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

## What is co-creation and why should researchers care?

When research is co-created, stakeholders become collaborators and potentially co-owners of the research. They are not thought of as recipients or clients of research, nor as a resource for extracting information, but as partners in it. This approach can lead to projects that are more trusted, useful, and sustainable because the process generates ownership and buy-in with those who will apply the results.

**Co-creation, co-production or co-design** are terms used in research to refer to the development of purpose, questions, resources, approach, methods and outputs of a project with stakeholders. The terms have varying meanings across disciplines and sectors, and their use may reflect historical quirks and disciplinary origins (see resources list at the end). Broadly, **co-design** often refers to jointly developing the project, intervention or outputs, and **co-production** often refers to shared knowledge production throughout the research process.

Of the three terms, our position at Agile is that **co-creation** is the strongest in terms of its ambition. We use co-creation as an umbrella term for sustained collaboration with stakeholders from project development through to outputs, uptake and learning.

At Agile, we care about doing co-creation in a deep, committed, and meaningful way. Effective co-creation provides greater potential for policy relevance and impact, richer and more robust outputs, and improved inclusion and respect for those affected by the research. At Agile it also involves close collaboration between research teams and a research support team who facilitate and guide the project from proposal development to impact monitoring after the formal project ends.

### 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.

# How we approach co-creation in Agile

A key criterion for Agile Sprint projects is the commitment to a robust plan for sustained and dynamic collaboration with stakeholders at every stage of the project. Here's how co-creation happens throughout the Agile Sprint lifecycle.

## 1 Identify the topic, people and questions






Agile is all about undertaking research to address critical policy issues. Therefore, co-creation starts with identifying a policy or practice problem to which research can offer a solution. A project might emerge from a serendipitous exchange between researchers and partners, from targeted outreach, or from a long-standing relationship. At this point you should map your stakeholders, to identify who should be key partners within the project team, and who are the wider stakeholders who could inform the project. Stakeholder mapping should consider not only who has influence over the policy issue, but also who is affected by it, who holds relevant knowledge, who may be excluded from usual decision-making spaces, and who may bear risks or costs from the research or its recommendations. Guidance is available in the Agile Sprint handbook (see resources list).





Developing the project concept together provides a strong basis for the relationship. Researchers and partners may be working to different incentives and timeframes. Researchers may need publishable outputs; partners may need timely evidence, briefings, tools, convenings or input into a live policy process. Co-creation requires these needs to be made explicit. You should listen to the concerns and needs of the prospective partner and consider what research can offer in terms of a solution. Dig deep to understand the policy challenge and to identify the key question. Work through different perspectives that might be informed by academic disciplines or policy realities to ensure a strong alignment between the policy issue and the research approach. You then need to agree that you want to work together on finding a solution.

## 2 Develop the proposal and partnership

Without guaranteed funding, partners often face constraints on time and resources for developing a research proposal. This is a challenge but is one that can be overcome if a strong sense of shared purpose exists. For all involved, the benefit is that a co-created project has a greater chance of impact, as the research will be better tailored to meet stakeholder needs and to deliver academic value.

Take time to work through the desired results, evidence and data needs, methods, approaches, and potential outputs together. Clarify each other's perspectives, priorities, and limitations. Work through the practicalities together. You may find it useful to ask these questions:

-  Who needs to be involved in which activities?
-  By when do partners need preliminary results and outputs?
-  What can realistically be delivered within the project timeframe?
-  What is needed for the proposal submission?
-  What funding and resources do partners need to fully participate?

-  What contributions should be recognised through authorship, acknowledgement, payment or other forms of credit?
-  When might the project start and is time built in for administrative steps on all sides?
-  Are there risks for any partners or affected groups in being associated with the research?
-  How will you maintain contact during the period when a proposal is being developed and under review, especially if the review process takes time?

Co-creation throughout this stage allows mutual expectations and commitments to be agreed. Collaborating on drafts also builds trust and understanding into the partnership, including understanding of each other's administrative processes, protocols and policies, as well as what outputs different partners need.

As part of the assessment process for Agile, review panels considered the approach to co-creation and the nature of the partnership. Reviewers looked at things like how partners intended to work together in practice and the roles that academic and non-academic members of the team would play. Working this through together and making it explicit in the proposal was important.

### 3 Co-create during the Sprint

Co-creation happens throughout the project in multiple ways through meetings, workshops, exchanges, writing, and analysis. There is no right or wrong way to do this in practice as each research project has its own needs and dynamics. However, we always encourage regular interaction between researchers and partners on research direction and emerging findings, and the creation of safe spaces for honest conversations. Regular contact helps to navigate unforeseen events, including personnel changes, and to negotiate tensions that can arise around speed, standards, language, political sensitivity, publication timelines or the balance between academic independence and policy usefulness.

Importantly, researchers need to understand from partners what is changing in the policy context and how the research and outputs may need to adapt in response to emerging needs and the shifting socio-political landscape. Some form of pivot has happened in every Agile Sprint. This is often a strength of the model, because it allows research to remain relevant as the policy context changes. However, adaptation needs to be bounded. Researchers and partners should agree which changes are essential, which are desirable, and which would make the project unfeasible within the available time and resources.

We strongly encourage collaboration on early research outputs through presentations, briefs and preliminary drafts. Working on outputs together makes them more robust, generates buy-in from partners to use the research results, and can lead to early outcomes and impact. This can also enhance the academic value of the research.

### 4 Plan for use, legacy and future collaboration

Co-creation rarely stops at the end of a project. Exchanges and application of the research are likely to continue after, and efforts might flow into future projects, where the cycle starts again. Care should be taken early on to think about who has the capacity, funding, and job roles to continue any activity outside of discrete funding periods.

Prepare a transition plan for the end of the project, including who will maintain outputs, manage data-sharing agreements, organise future convenings, communicate findings, and track emerging impacts.

A final event is a good way to review the project together, recognize and acknowledge everyone's contributions, and plan for life beyond the Sprint including ongoing impact. Use this period to discuss shared ownership of outputs and impacts, and how you want to maintain relationships as these can have significant mutual benefits for everyone over the long term.

## Managing risks with co-creation

Co-creation is not the same as consultation. Consultation may ask stakeholders for views on a project that has already been designed. Co-creation gives stakeholders meaningful opportunities to shape the project itself. Co-creation is also not the same as unlimited responsiveness: a co-created project still needs clear boundaries, roles, timelines and standards of evidence.

Co-creation carries risks if it is poorly designed and does not give attention to power and capacity. Not all stakeholders have equal time, resources, authority or freedom to participate, and not all forms of knowledge are treated equally in research and policy settings. It can become tokenistic if stakeholders are invited in only after key decisions have been made. It can become extractive if partners are expected to contribute knowledge, networks or legitimacy without adequate recognition or support. It can also overburden individuals or organisations with limited capacity.

These risks should be discussed openly and mitigated through clear roles, resourcing, fair recognition and realistic expectations.

### Top tips

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

**Co-create from the very start** to develop a project that is academically interesting, policy relevant and operationally feasible, valuing different voices and perspectives.

**Map stakeholders carefully**, including those affected by the issue and those with policy influence; **clarify roles**, decision-making authority, expectations, timelines and resources.

**Be open and honest** about practicalities and limitations to avoid the project expanding beyond what is feasible within the timeframe and resources.

**Make time for collaboration** through regular meetings and informal interactions to foster positive feedback loops and honest discussions of tensions and trade-offs.

**Act and adjust** throughout the project to address emerging needs and stakeholder feedback.

**Recognise and reward** the contributions of everyone involved.

Aim to **build long-term, collaborative relationships** to enable research uptake and impact beyond the end of the project.

## Resources

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

[Bandola-Gill, J., Arthur, M., & Leng, R. I. \(2023\). What is co-production? Conceptualising and understanding co-production of knowledge and policy across different theoretical perspectives. Evidence & Policy, 19\(2\), 275- 298.](#)

[Chambers, J.M., Wyborn, C., Ryan, M.E. et al. Six modes of co-production for sustainability. Nat Sustain 4, 983–996 \(2021\).](#)

[Million, Flore. “Co-Creation Toolkit: From design to implementation” Oxfam-Québec.](#)

[Oancea, A., Marshall-Brown, A., Scott-Barrett, J., Cai, W., Kamphausen, L., McLeod, C., Polding, L., Watson, S. \(2024\). The Responsible Knowledge Exchange, Engagement and Impact \(RKEEI\) Framework and Principles.](#)

[Troiano, M., Sidwell, N., Boyle, J., James, M., Wright, G., Barbrook-Johnson, P. and Hirons, M. \(2024\). Impact and collaboration in environmental research: moving universities from evidence producers to co-producers. Agile Initiative, University of Oxford, UK.](#)

[Voorberg, W. H., Bekkers, V. J. J. M., & Tummers, L. G. \(2014\). A Systematic Review of Co-Creation and Co-Production: Embarking on the social innovation journey. Public Management Review, 17\(9\), 1333–1357.](#)

[Webinar recording. “The Agile Initiative: Co-creation and stakeholder engagement”. YouTube, 2024.](#)

[Webinar recording. “The Agile Initiative: Should universities shift from evidence producers to co-producers?” 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.

The Agile Initiative 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 the Agile Initiative, based on learning collated by the programme support team and researchers.

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Other guides in the series include:

- Equality Impact Assessment
- Interdisciplinary research
- Managing rapid research projects
- Theory of change in research

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