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New Zealand Government

# A guide to policy sprints

How to run a successful sprint team



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## DEPARTMENT OF THE PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET

TE TARI O TE PIRIMIA ME TE KOMITI MATUA

# Purpose of this document

*A guide to policy sprints* has been created to provide information for the leads of policy sprints or sprint teams. It contains definitions for the characteristics and triggers of policy sprints, as well as best-practice advice on how to get sprint teams started and keep them going up to the point of a successful delivery. This guide can help sprint leads focus on the key factors that contribute to success and help avoid known pitfalls and risks.

# Publication details

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# When to use a policy sprint

In the Public Service, a policy sprint is a way of working that's fast-paced, usually involving multiple government agencies, and designed to resolve a presenting problem within a short timeframe.

The decision to establish a policy sprint for a particular challenge may be made by ministers, central agencies, or by leaders within agencies. At times, this decision may be taken quickly (if a critical project is heading off-track, for instance, or if a looming deadline is at risk), and it likely requires rapid action.

Sprints can be used for many types of work – from 'start up' projects with a need for momentum and structure, to work programmes that need accelerating to meet a deadline. Sprints can also help in instances where a project has drifted off track and needs some course correction.

Given the possible range of circumstances in which a sprint might be set up, a starting point for sprint leads is to consider the type of sprint needed – looking at what the presenting problem, gap or opportunity is, and then tailoring the approach accordingly. This diagnosis determines the kind of intervention needed, the outcome sought, the skills required, and expectations of the team.

Case-by-case judgement is required on whether all conditions for a successful sprint are met, and if not, on accepting trade-offs or a degree of ambiguity. This stage may also require political judgement.

Annex 1 sets out some of the types of sprints and their different purposes, using the STARS framework (diagnosing whether the sprint is needed for a **Start-up Scenario**, a **Turnaround**, **Accelerated Growth** of an ongoing project, **Realignment**, or for **Sustaining Success**).

Annex 2 contains a checklist to use when considering a sprint. It sets out a range of trigger questions on problem suitability, sponsorship, team composition, logistics, and follow through.



# How to set your sprint up for success

While every sprint will be different, experience to date suggests that policy sprints have the best chance of success when as many as possible of the following conditions are met.

## A well-defined and agreed objective

Both those commissioning the sprint and those leading it should be clear on the sprint's purpose, and what outcome or deliverable is expected in the given timeframe. For public servants, it's important to have an understanding of ministerial perspectives on the issue, including the degree of alignment between ministers or any differences that will need to be addressed.

## Defined priority status

Sprint processes rely on the ability of the lead to commission work at pace from across agencies, on freeing people up from other work, and on teams working urgently – and at times under pressure. This way of working can only be done on a few priorities at one time.

It's worth being aware of what other sprints are happening concurrently and working with other leaders to avoid putting pressure on the same people at the same time. Ideally, team members are freed up from other work commitments and can focus full time on the sprint. This creates an opportunity cost to the government's broader work programme that may need to be managed.

A guide to policy sprints

## Unambiguous commissioning

Those working with or alongside sprint teams need to be clear on the team's role and how it will impact them. Without this, misunderstandings and tension can occur. It's useful for leaders to regularly communicate the purpose and any updates (e.g. through stand-ups or email updates).

### Points to note

In practice, early commissioning can be difficult, as the nature of the issues may only be revealed once a team begins to investigate. Ministers and central agencies may be aware something is off track, but work is needed to determine exactly what's needed to address it.

Ongoing communication helps. Once a team is in place and the task becomes clearer, explicit check-in points can help. To avoid setting impossible deadlines, commissioners should be fully informed on work done to date and any complexities when committing to timeframes.

## Nuanced leadership

The skill, experience, and judgement of the sprint lead is a critical success factor. Experience shows a degree of seniority is important, given the need to corral other agencies and resources, and in convening meetings of senior officials. Experience working with ministers helps understand their perspective and objectives. The lead's role also includes offering a degree of constructive challenge. Key leadership roles include understanding the context, ministerial expectations, managing relationships, building a small but skilled team, and driving delivery.

## Assigned accountability

As sprint lead, you should be as clear as possible on who you are accountable to and for what, as well as on the roles other leaders and agencies will play. Sprints work well when accountability arrangements are as close to orthodox as possible – ideally with a single chief executive lead. Being clear on the role played by the responsible minister is important.

### Points to note

Concerns when accountability does not sit in the usual lines might include:

- risks to long-run outcomes (by disempowering those who will deliver the ongoing work)
- expertise (questions about generalists coming into specific areas)
- free and frank advice (if, for example, usual processes are not followed).

A degree of ambiguity can be managed for short periods of time in the interests of cutting through challenges that have failed to progress through the usual processes. Judgement is required here.

## Clear central agency roles

Once a sprint is commissioned, it's important to have clarity on the roles of central agencies. Roles can include liaising with the Prime Minister and ministers, commissioning work, and brokering resources. It's helpful to establish early on what role each agency will play and how this will fit with their usual roles – including Public Service Commission as employer of chief executives, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet as advisor to the Prime Minister, and the Treasury as government's economic and fiscal advisor.

Central agencies may have a dedicated person working in the sprint team and connecting back to their home agency. Consistent with usual practice, they're also likely to be providing second-opinion advice to ministers on the issue at hand. Know and involve your key contact points, such as your DPMC Policy Advisory Group advisor and Assistant Commissioner at PSC.

## Engaged ministers and ministerial offices

The time and availability of lead ministers and their offices is critical. Sprint processes rely on iteration of material, so rapid turnaround of drafts is very helpful. Ministers' offices also play a role in managing the political interface, such as communications between ministerial offices, with the Prime Minister's office, and with coalition partners.

A point person needs to be identified in the minister's office who can attend daily stand-ups and pass on feedback, changes in context, or other ministerial perspectives. They can help ensure that ministerial expectations are being met, troubleshoot if issues arise, and facilitate ministerial meetings as required.

## An explicit endpoint

By nature, sprints are short and time-limited. Early and active consideration of the endpoint should include an exit plan for the team, with clarity on when accountability lines revert to the norm and an approach to managing the transition back to business as usual. This will provide certainty to the team and their home agencies, and helps to avoid the risk of ambiguity as the sprint winds up.

It's worth considering a formal closure document setting out details such as who is responsible for any outstanding tasks and next steps in delivery.

### Points to note

The exact end point for the sprint may not be clear at the start, as time is needed to work out a plan. In this case, ongoing communications and agreed check-in points are helpful.

These are all things to consider when setting out on a sprint. Given the pace and nature of this type of work, it's likely that not all conditions will be perfectly met all the time. The main thing is to consider the lessons from experience, use your judgement on your context, and look for ways to mitigate any risks through ongoing discussions or agreed check-in points.

## Challenges to navigate

Some of the challenges experienced by sprint teams reflect an absence of known success factors. For example, where the sprint team's role and purpose are less clear or not shared, others experience greater tension and a bumpier process. Below are some of the challenges that sprint teams have encountered, and some practical ways that they might be overcome.

## Understanding what a sprint is and isn't

In simple terms, a sprint in the Public Service context is simply a way of working that's fast-paced, time-limited, usually cross-agency and designed to quickly resolve a presenting problem.

Some people are new to the language of sprints, while to others it can evoke a specific Agile methodology. The term has been used to describe a range of approaches, and at times, has been used only after the work has begun, or as a shorthand. These differences in understanding and connotations have led to confusion. This guide is intended to help address this issue.

While policy sprints draw from the Agile way of working iteratively and collaboratively, they don't necessarily follow Agile, Scrum or Kanban methodologies. In practice, some teams have found tools such as daily stand-ups and weekly retrospectives to be useful tools when adapted for the context.

## Misaligned expectations

Frustrations can arise if the expectations of everyone involved in the sprint and relevant agency teams are not aligned. This links to clear commissioning and to communication about what the sprint is for, and – just as importantly – what it's *not* for.

As lead, it's important for you to get a good understanding of what's required, be able to articulate what success looks like, and ensure that everyone is on the same page. This will likely require a constant focus on managing relationships.

This could be by developing and circulating a clear sprint brief to other leaders, and establishing regular governance arrangements. Oversight groups led by a chief executive or regular emails have worked well. Central agencies can help when differences do arise.

## Displacement of agency teams

Sprints are designed to cut through process and quickly address an issue, and teams who would normally be responsible for the work can potentially feel displaced. The resulting dynamic can affect the agency team's morale, posing risks to delivery and implementation once the sprint team concludes. It can appear easier to intervene for a period with focus on a strong team and the immediate results of quick delivery, than to drive an ongoing work programme.

Consideration needs to be given to the impacts on existing arrangements and the transition back to business as usual. Careful communication helps.

## Costs

Senior, full-time, and focused leaders and team members are critical for the success of any sprint, and this comes with costs to other work areas. Leaders may need to put in cover arrangements for a period to focus on one issue. This is particularly true for those working to multiple ministers across a number of work areas, and collective ministerial support is needed here.

Progress on other work programmes may be slowed temporarily, and there are transaction costs in bringing sprint team members up to speed and in transferring information. Some sprint teams have brought in additional external support at times, with associated costs. Clarity on costs and where they're expected to fall is an important consideration when establishing a sprint.

## Transitioning back to business as usual

This needs to be considered early and often in the sprint process. As noted above, sprints need a clear endpoint (even if this needs to be revised) and arrangements to support handover back to the lead or delivery agency.

Challenges have arisen when accountabilities have become unclear, or where unclear responsibility for outstanding tasks has led to matters facing through the cracks.

Annex 2 of this guide summarises the key questions to ask when embarking on a sprint process. Again, not all questions will be able to be fully met in each case, but the list is intended as a prompt for the right conversations, to inform judgement and trade-offs involved, and to enable risk mitigation planning.

# Some practical tips

Once a sprint is getting underway, the pace can be fast and there's a lot to consider. Below are some practical ideas to help you hit the ground running.

## Team location

Ideally, sprint teams sit together in a shared team area. This allows for rapid development of ideas and communication across disciplines (e.g. policy and legislation drafters together, communications experts embedded in the team). For sprints that involve sensitive issues, a secure, private room will be needed.

Securing a space is an early priority, particularly for sprint leads not based in a large agency with a higher likelihood of access to available accommodation. For some ministers, having the sprint team close (in the Beehive) will be important. Central agencies will be able to help navigate this.

Related to this, the team will need access to appropriate IT – either using their own agency laptops and emails, or being set up with shared IT by a host agency. As part of this set up, consider privacy arrangements (such as rules around what and how information will be shared), and an approach to filing documents (including meeting OIA requirements).

## Team composition

As leader, your role includes securing the right team members with the skills needed for successful delivery. For some sprints, this will require some technical expertise on the matter at hand. For others, bringing in fresh perspectives to cut through blockages and reset dynamics will be important.

As well as core policy and technical skills, consider whether the team requires specialists to be involved from the outset – for example:

- communications experts if material needs to be developed for external audiences
- legislative drafters if policy is to be rapidly progressed to legislation
- operational and delivery experts if the work needs to move quickly from policy to implementation.

Build in administrative support for yourself and the team – you may need support with scheduling, booking meetings and rooms, setting up equipment, and managing contracts and budget.

## Programme management

The lead will have a lot on their plate, and will need support to oversee planning, check on progress, identify blocks and risks, and to keep all parts of the work programme moving in synch. Sprint teams have found that a flexible approach works well – there’s unlikely to be time or need for complex programme management structures, and things can change quickly. It can be helpful to have someone other than the sprint lead who is responsible for tracking progress, retaining a risk register, and capturing lessons along the way.

Having people in the team dedicated to driving the process allows others in the team to focus on content. Central agencies may be able to identify people across the system who have the requisite skills to step in.

## Ways of working

As leader, you’ll need to establish the way the sprint team will work. Some examples of what has worked well in practice include:

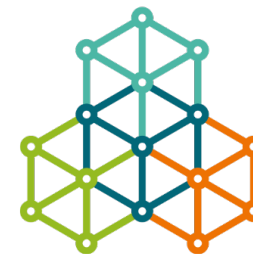
- **regular team stand-ups** – at least daily, perhaps at the start and end of each day. These meetings are short, focused 15-minute catch ups for all team members to check in on progress, share any changes in context, and identify risks and opportunities. They can be an efficient way to keep central agencies and ministerial office staff informed. Keep them short and take longer discussions offline.
- **weekly retrospectives** – a longer meeting towards the end of each week to review progress, celebrate success, and set up the plan for the week ahead.
- **transparent communication** – consider how you want to communicate progress to other agencies, particularly those with a stake in future delivery or who have provided resources. Drafting weekly emails for your chief executive to circulate to their colleagues is one way to do this.

## Where to get support

As the Public Service becomes more experienced in the sprint style of working, the network of experienced sprint leaders and team members will grow.

DPMC’s Policy Advisory Group and the Policy Project are a good first port of call to connect you with others – both leaders to test ideas with and the names of practitioners in the Public Service who may be able to step in.

The Policy Project can also pass on good practice, including examples of sprint briefing documents and project tools that previous sprints have used. They would be happy to hear your reflections as part of our ongoing support for a high-performing Public Service.



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# Annex 1: Using the STARS framework to diagnose sprint need and type

	Indicators	Use sprint team to:
<b>Start-up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The project is newly established or still forming</li> <li>– Goals are broad, and roles/processes are unclear</li> <li>– There’s excitement but also ambiguity and lack of structure</li> <li>– Success depends on creating new systems, securing buy-in, and assembling a team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Define a clear scope and delivery plan</li> <li>– Establish governance, tools, and rhythms</li> <li>– Build early momentum and legitimacy</li> </ul> <p>Potential trade-offs: morale or buy-in of the BAU team (especially if externally resourced).</p>
<b>Turnaround</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Major deadlines or deliverables have been missed</li> <li>– Stakeholder confidence is low (e.g. from the minister or public)</li> <li>– The project has visibility and is attracting heat or scrutiny</li> <li>– Urgency is high, morale may be low, and risks are escalating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Triage and stabilise delivery</li> <li>– Identify and fix critical blockers</li> <li>– Deliver visible early wins to restore confidence</li> </ul> <p>Potential trade-offs: temporary disruption to usual accountability arrangements.</p>
<b>Accelerated growth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The project has strong momentum or positive results</li> <li>– New demands, spin-off work, or scope creep are emerging</li> <li>– The team is overwhelmed or processes haven’t scaled</li> <li>– There’s risk of burnout, mistakes, or reputational harm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Build structure to support scale (e.g. documentation, handovers, process upgrades)</li> <li>– Prioritise and streamline growing workstreams</li> <li>– Protect the core team from overload</li> </ul> <p>Potential trade-offs: muddled accountabilities.</p>
<b>Realignment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The project is active, but goals have drifted or lost clarity</li> <li>– The team is busy, but impact is unclear or misaligned with political priorities</li> <li>– There’s internal friction, unclear roles, or lack of shared purpose</li> <li>– External stakeholders may be confused or disengaged.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Reconnect the project to its strategic goals or mandate</li> <li>– Refocus scope and reset expectations</li> <li>– Re-engage stakeholders and rebuild internal alignment</li> </ul> <p>Potential trade-offs: BAU teams disempowered; may impact long term delivery.</p>
<b>Sustaining success</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The project is delivering reliably and meeting expectations</li> <li>– Stakeholders are satisfied, but innovation may be slowing</li> <li>– Risk of stagnation, succession issues, or external disruption</li> <li>– There’s a sense of “keep doing what we’re doing” — but the environment is changing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Future-proof the project (e.g. update tools, prepare for scale or handover)</li> <li>– Introduce small innovations or test improvements</li> <li>– Check alignment with evolving ministerial priorities</li> </ul> <p>Potential trade-offs: morale of the BAU team and future capability.</p>

# Annex 2: Public sector sprint team readiness and use checklist

Considering a sprint? Ask yourself:

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## 1. Problem suitability

- Is the problem clearly defined and agreed by ministers?
  - Is the problem urgent, complex (cross-agency) or blocked in the current process?
  - Can progress be made in four to eight weeks of focused work? (e.g. for complex policy issues, some work has already been done)
  - What are the alternative options? Is the purpose of the sprint clear?
  - What are the expected deliverables?
- 

## 2. Sponsorship and buy-in

- Is there a lead minister for decision-making? What role will central agencies play?
  - Can a senior lead official be made available full – or close to full – time?
  - Are chief executives (and, in turn senior officials) briefed on the priority of the issue?
- 

## 3. Team composition

- Can the right people be made available, across functions, including links to future operationalisation and communications?
  - Are supporting functions available, including project and process support?
  - What is the impact on capability and future delivery if the sprint team is not based within the home agency?
- 

## 4. Logistics and support

- Can a space for co-location of the team and building access be made available quickly?
  - Can IT and system access for the team be made ready quickly? This should also include access to systems as needed.
- 

## 5. Alignment and follow through

- Who owns the work after the sprint ends?
- Are there resources such as time, budget, and staff for implementation?

Also consider any fundamental issues – whether capability, capacity, leadership skills, or ministerial alignment. This will need to be addressed ahead of the sprint ending and work returning to business as usual.