Australian Government

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Agile policy playbook

How to use Agile methods and approaches to increase the effectiveness of your policy team

PO
Project Office

Overview

We've created this playbook to help you work more effectively as a team by using 'Agile-inspired' tools and techniques
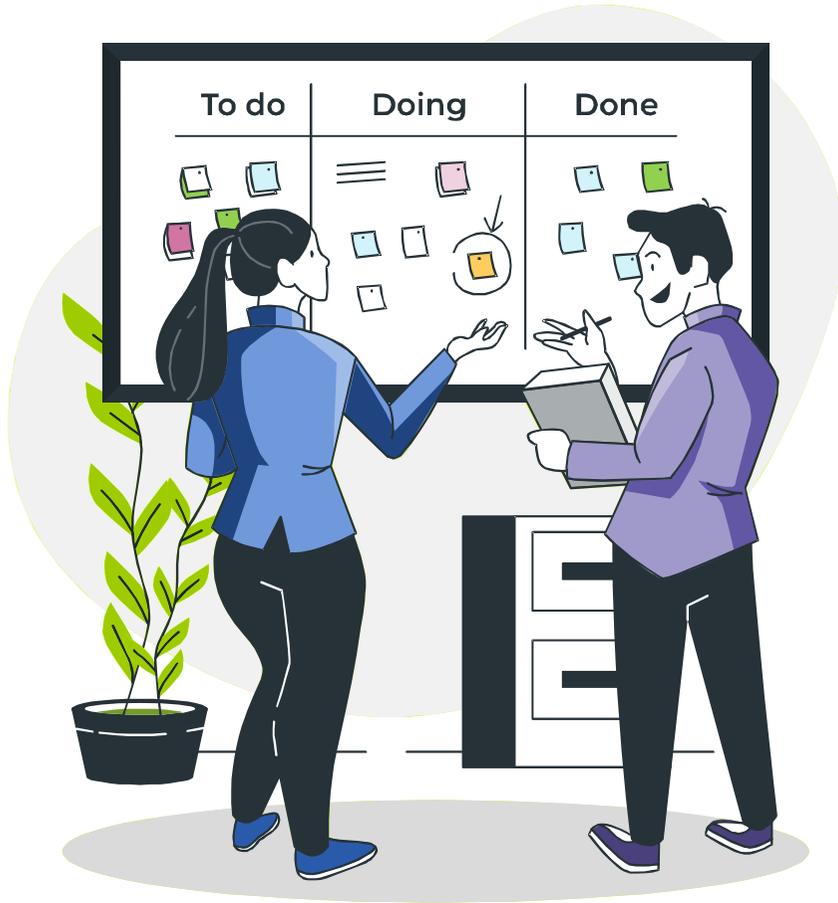
Agile methodology 'in a nutshell'

Key concepts and terms

Common challenges and lessons from the Project Office

Tips and templates for you to use with your team
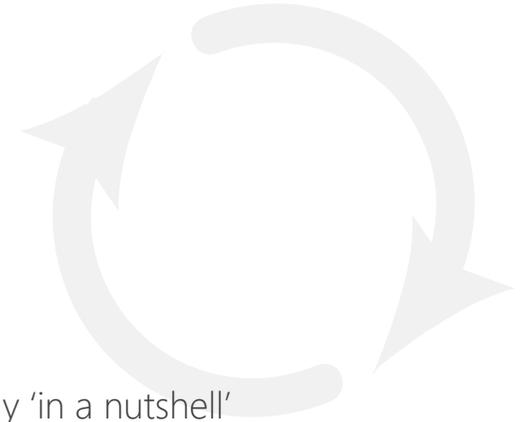
What is Agile?

Originating in software development, Agile is an iterative approach to problem solving and project management that empowers teams and can improve the quality and speed of delivery[1,2].

A key benefit of the Agile methodology is the ability to apply *some* or *all* of its aspects to suit the needs and objectives of your team.

Core features and benefits of the methodology are summarised in the diagram.

Iterative approach

Concepts (rather than details) are used to seek feedback early and accelerate delivery and design

- Increased flexibility
- Greater 'customer' satisfaction
- Builds consensus with stakeholders

Goal-oriented planning

Goals and outcomes are used to focus and prioritise work

- Greater team satisfaction
- Teams think more broadly when developing solutions

Team collaboration

Increased transparency and team engagement empowers teams to solve problems together

- Diversity of perspectives and skills used to solve problems leads to improved quality of output

Continuous learning

Regular, structured reflection increases team effectiveness over time

- Teams learn from their mistakes quickly and apply lessons learned

Features & Benefits[2]

1.   Atlassian, 2020, *What is Agile?* https://www.atlassian.com/agile
2.   *Agile best practice for more effective teams*, 2020, https://www.planview.com/resources/guide/agile-methodologies-a-beginners-guide/agile-best-practices-effective-teams/

Key concepts and terms

What is scrum?

'**Scrum**' is one of the most popular Agile methods to tackle complex problems[1]. It comprises a series of meetings and roles[2].

How it works

- The work is divided into '**sprints**' - a set duration (often a week) for goals and tasks to be achieved.
- Team members commit to a series of **meetings** aimed to increase transparency, facilitate collaboration and encourage continuous improvement (see 'Tips and Templates' for more detail).
- Certain **roles** can be assigned to provide direction and clarity, and these can be rotated amongst team members between sprints.

Tip: Watch this video for a 5 minute overview.

Key meetings

Sprint planning	Daily stand-up	Sprint retro
A recurring meeting scheduled at the beginning of each sprint to define the goals to be achieved during the sprint	A daily meeting for the team to agree on the tasks to be taken forward that day, assign responsibility and communicate any 'blockers'	A recurring meeting at the end of each sprint to discuss what went well and what could be improved
🕐 Up to an hour	🕐 15 minutes	🕐 Up to an hour

Roles and responsibilities

Delivery Team	Scrum Master	Product Owner
• Plans and delivers the work	• Facilitates meetings • Encourages active participation • Plays timekeeper role • Suited to a team member with prior exposure to Agile	• In an APS environment, often an SES officer • Sets the direction and vision for a deliverable and provides quality assurance on final product

Tip: The Scrum Master and Product Owner roles are not essential but can enhance team effectiveness.

1.   Scrum.org – What is Scrum? 2020, https://www.scrum.org/resources/what-is-scrum
2.   Smartsheet: Scrum methodology, 2020, https://www.smartsheet.com/agile-vs-scrum-vs-waterfall-vs-kanban

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Common Scrum challenges and lessons from the PM&C Project Office

The **Scrum** framework supports rapid product delivery (sprint planning and daily stand-ups) and helps teams regularly reflect on their performance (retros). However, the method can take a while for teams to get used to. Some strategies to manage common challenges include:

Challenge 1 – Lack of engagement by team members[3]

It takes a while to feel comfortable with the style and increased frequency of communication. Allow time for the team to gain confidence with the routine and practices of Scrum meetings.

Tips: Hold a meeting early to discuss how your team will use Agile ways of working to set clear expectations. Consider designating a 'Scrum Master' who will help ensure everyone participates in the discussion.

Challenge 3 – Too much focus on day-to-day delivery makes you neglect the bigger picture

One of the strengths of Scrum is that it allows teams to work towards a solution even if the exact path is unclear at the start[2]. But it's easy to get caught up in completing your day-to-day tasks and lose sight of the end goal.

Tip: Use your sprint planning meetings to ensure you remain on track.

'**Kanban**' means 'sign-board' in Japanese. Toyota introduced the concept in the late 1940s when the company altered their manufacturing method. Vehicles were produced based on customer demand, rather than forecasting (i.e. new vehicles were manufactured only once complete ones were sold). This rule provides the basis for using Kanban boards outside of car manufacturing – the aim is to complete individual tasks before starting new ones to continue the 'pull' of work[4].

Kanban board

| To do | Doing | Done |
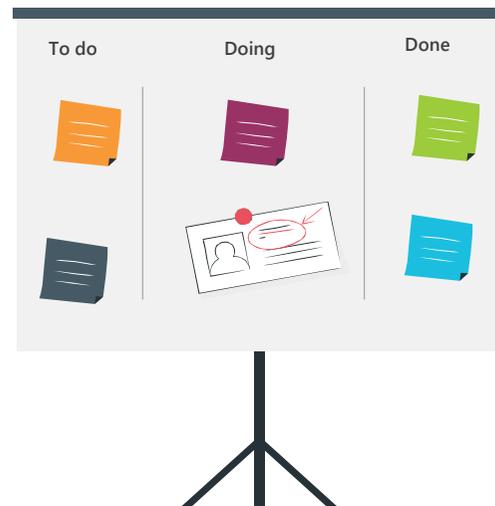
Challenge 2 – Poorly defined tasks can lead to inaccuracies and delays[1]

The aim of a Kanban (see box) is to break down work into chunks or items that can be completed in a day and increase transparency. But poorly defined tasks can create confusion and increase risk of duplication, and be a sign of imprecise goals.

Tips:
- Take the time to nail your sprint goals.
- Set realistic timeframes for each task (and if a task will take longer than a day, split it in two).
- Ensure tasks are clear to everyone at stand-ups.
- Keep the Kanban board up to date.

Challenge 4 – Lack of commitment to continuous improvement[3]

Agile practices emphasise the importance of continuous improvement, inherently acknowledging that things rarely go to plan. Committing to individual and team reflection helps teams become more effective and collaborative over time.

Tip: Hold sprint retros regularly to prompt ideas for continuous improvement and lessons learned.

1. Smartsheet, Disadvantages with Agile, 2020, https://www.smartsheet.com/agile-vs-scrum-vs-waterfall-vs-kanban
2. Harvard Business Review, Embracing Agile, 2016, https://hbr.org/2016/05/embracing-agile
3. Harvard Business Review, Why Agile Goes Awry — and How to Fix It, 2018, https://hbr.org/2018/10/why-agile-goes-awry-and-how-to-fix-it
4. Kanban tool, History of Kanban, 2020, https://kanbantool.com/kanban-guide/kanban-history

Tips and templates

Sprint planning, daily stand-ups and sprint retrospectives

Sprint planning meetings

Purpose

The **sprint planning meeting** is a recurring discussion for the team to come together and agree on a manageable number of **sprint goals** they'd like to achieve during the sprint (for example, 'Submit decision brief to the PM').

The team should then sketch out the individual **tasks** required to achieve the sprint goals (which, for the example above, might include 'Consult II&E on brief' and 'Clear brief through AS').

Kanban after sprint planning
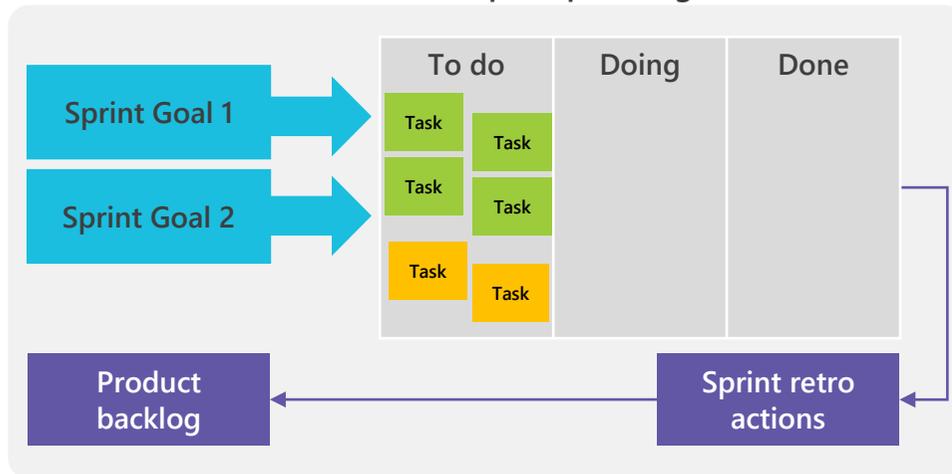
WHO'S INVOLVED

Delivery team

WHEN TO USE IT

Start of sprint

Objectives

1 **Develop sprint goals**

Think about what needs to be done (refer to relevant planning material or sprint retro actions) and agree on sprint goals.

2 **Review items from product backlog**

Are there any items from the product backlog (list of tasks from previous sprints that haven't been completed) that could be tackled in this sprint? Move them over into 'To Do' column.

3 **Agree on items / tasks for the sprint**

Put new tasks into the 'To Do' column.

Each task should reflect a single activity or 'step' in a process to achieve each sprint goal. That way, tasks can be easily split across a number of team members and progress can be monitored at daily stand-up meetings.

Key questions

"What **outcomes** do we want to achieve?"

"What key **milestones** fall within this sprint?"

How to run a sprint planning session

Preparation

Before the session

1 Review sprint retrospective outcomes (sprint retrospectives are discussed later in this document) and note any actions. Incorporate relevant actions into development of sprint goals (skip this step if its your first sprint planning session for the project).

2 Clear completed tasks (from 'Done' column on Scrum board).

3 Schedule a meeting with the whole team (up to an hour should be sufficient).

4 Nominate a 'scrum master' to plan and lead the discussion.

Agenda

1 Restate the overall objective for the project

This is an important step to make sure you don't lose sight of the bigger picture

2 Discuss and agree your sprint goals for this sprint

This is your chance to make sure everyone in your team understands your objective for the sprint

3 Decide whether to move any tasks from the product backlog to the 'to do' column for this sprint

4 Settle as a group on the individual tasks you will need to complete to achieve your sprint goals and add these to the 'to do' column

Tips and tricks

- Agree on a sprint duration that suits the workflow of your team. (E.g. weekly sprints for more rapid and iterative delivery, or fortnightly sprints if there is more time between deliverables).

- A great starting point is the **product backlog**[1] - a list of items that likely need to be completed but haven't been allocated or prioritised yet.

- If relevant, review your high-level plan or objectives to guide discussion of what the sprint goals should be (i.e. look at milestones and upcoming deadlines).

- Focus on the outcomes – always link tasks back to the overarching sprint goals.

- Be realistic – set goals that can be achieved in the sprint duration.

Daily stand-ups

Purpose

Team **stand-ups** are daily meetings for the delivery team to quickly clarify responsibility for individual tasks throughout a sprint.

WHO'S INVOLVED

Delivery team

WHEN WE USE IT

Daily (typically to start the day)

Kanban board

To do	Doing	Done
Task	Task	Task
Task	Task	
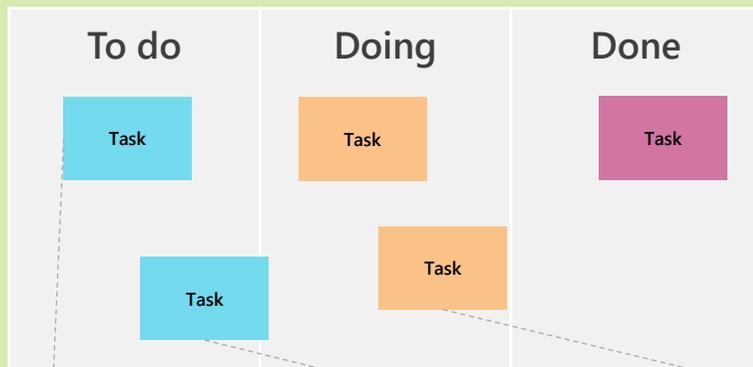
"Today I'm going to focus on the stakeholder engagement plan".

"I'll follow up with an email and suggest a time next week to discuss *x*".

"I'm still working on the project roadmap. I aim to circulate it this afternoon for feedback".

Objectives

1 Clear tasks from 'Doing' to 'Done'

If this is not the first daily stand-up of the sprint, clear completed items from the day before from 'Doing' to 'Done'.

If team members need help with their items in 'Doing', daily stand-ups are a great opportunity to request or offer assistance.

2 Self-assign tasks

Team members select outstanding tasks from the 'To do' column and assign a due date (usually within the sprint). Mark initials on the task to clarify responsibility.

3 If relevant to the current sprint, include additional tasks

Try to avoid introducing major new tasks or ideas to the Kanban mid-sprint unless they are required to achieve your sprint goals.

# How to run a daily stand up

Preparation

Before the session

1 Agree a time for a recurring daily meeting.

2 Find a space to set up a Kanban board. Project management should be visual!

3 Think about your day – what is achievable within the timeframe you have? What are the potential 'blockers[1]'?

> 💡 **TIP**
> **Your Kanban space could be a whiteboard, free wall space or online platform if working remotely (e.g. Microsoft Teams)**

Tips and tricks

- Plan the meeting around your team. The key is consistency – make it a daily team commitment (morning or afternoon).

- Stand ups should be short and sharp and focused on *who* is doing what and *how* others can pitch in to help. We try to stick to 15 minutes and then let people get on with their work. Staying standing reduces the risk of rambling or loss of focus. If an issue requires further discussion, schedule a dedicated meeting.

- Try to avoid introducing new ideas – that's what sprint planning sessions are for.

- The Kanban is great for capturing additional information to help your team work effectively together. Use the Kanban to capture useful reminders such as key dates, leave, extra-curricular commitments and other team learnings from sprint retros (e.g. ways of working, rules of engagement).

- It can be helpful to divide the Kanban up into work streams to clarify responsibilities or priorities. For example, 'stakeholder engagement' and 'research' streams.

Sprint retrospectives

Purpose

Sprint retrospectives are recurring meetings for the delivery team to come together and discuss what worked well and not so well at the end of a sprint. The structure of the meeting allows teams to reflect on collective and individual performance, and consider what can be improved in the future.

WHO'S INVOLVED
Delivery team

WHEN WE USE IT
End of sprint

Objectives

1 **Agree what went well**
As a group, identify any strengths and enablers of last sprint's outcomes.

2 **Agree what didn't go so well**
As a group, identify any weaknesses and blockers from the last sprint.

3 **Identify actions to take forward to improve team performance**
As a group, discuss lessons learned and identify practical actions to enable continuous improvement.

How to run a sprint retrospective

Preparation

Before the retrospective

1 Find a meeting space for about 30 minutes to an hour.

2 Nominate a facilitator.

3 Prepare any supporting material (we generally use butchers paper, markers and Post-its; see right hand column for our process and the next slide for a template).

Agenda

1 **Set the scene**

Welcome everyone to the meeting and establish rules of engagement (see 'Tips and tricks').

2 **Evaluate sprint or project performance**

Start with the sprint goals – *did we achieve them?*

Then discuss performance against goals using three guiding questions (see next slide).

3 **Wrap up and close**

Quickly run through list of actions, assign owners if relevant, and agree timeframes.

Tips and tricks

- Ensure the team feels comfortable sharing views so honest opinions are aired (i.e. don't make it personal, don't take it personally. Listen with an open mind).

- There are many ways to run a retro. To encourage everyone to participate and reduce groupthink, we pause for two minutes after each guiding question (see next slide) and ask team members to reflect individually and write their ideas on individual Post-its. At the end of the two minutes, take turns to share your reflections and discuss with the group.

- Ensure the team spends adequate time evaluating both the product (outcome) and the process (how you got there).

- If your team needs help on agreeing next steps / actions, try asking team members to vote on which items should be prioritised.

- You may want to ask a neutral outsider to facilitate your retro.

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Sprint retrospective template ✏️

What worked well?	What didn't go so well?	How can we improve next time?
[Description.]	[Description.]	[Description.]

💡 **If working remotely there are a number of platforms, such as Miro, that can be used to run your sprint retro virtually.**

TIP

Actions to take forward

[Description.]

- Action 1
- Action 2
- Action 3

- Action 4
- Action 5
- Action 6

Continue your learning with these additional resources

Some examples of external information

Atlassian agile coach
Comprehensive and easy-to-digest guides on how to use agile in project delivery

Scrum guide
Official scrum process guide

Modern agile
Agile information, including links, resources and training activities

Articles
Embracing Agile, Harvard Business Review, 2016
Agile in Government, Deloitte Insights, 2017
How the public sector can remain agile beyond times of crisis, 2017
Agile as the next government revolution, BCG, 2018
Conquering the challenges of agile at scale in government, BCG, 2019