Tackling Wicked Problems
An accelerated sprint workshop for systems change

Custom Executive Education at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford
'If there were simple solutions to Wicked Problems, we would have implemented them by now.

We need an approach that fosters collaboration, experimentation and creative thinking, while designing interventions that make a difference at scale.'

Peter Tufano
Peter Moores Dean and Professor of Finance, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford
Wicked Problems defy conventional solutions

Climate change. Extreme poverty. Water scarcity. These are among the most urgent, intractable problems of our day – the challenges that top the agendas of governments, businesses, NGOs and international bodies.

To overcome these challenges, we cannot resort to conventional solutions. We must change systems.

Oxford University’s Saïd Business School has developed an accelerated workshop approach that draws on the sprint model originally pioneered by the high-tech industry to speed up innovation processes, that bring about systems change.

Our approach

Our approach blends the rigour of academic research with the agility of a sprint process. We convene leaders from across disciplines to tackle Wicked Problems in a short timeframe. While exploring potential levers for systems change, participants are encouraged to challenge assumptions, think expansively, move quickly and, uniquely, draw upon Oxford University research and expertise.

This highly interactive experience delivers more than just new ideas. Participants emerge with actionable recommendations for shifting and reshaping systems that tackle the problem, whether in business, government or society.
Our approach

The sprint workshop is customised to address a specific Wicked Problem

It convenes the right experts in the room and explores suitable pathways to systems change. Workshop participants engage in a process of designing, testing and iterating solutions, while drawing on the knowledge and experience of our experts and researchers.

The approach emphasises:

- **cross-sector collaboration** that brings together diverse stakeholders from academia, government and business to engage in in-depth thinking
- **speed and agility** which borrows from – and builds on – the principles of design thinking and agile, lean methodologies, so compressing months of work into a few days
- **academic provocation** that questions assumptions, encourages debate and pushes stakeholders to think and act in new ways. Sharing papers and new research can also inform discussions
- **actionable recommendations** where prototypes are run through rigorous reviews and strategic revisions to produce powerful solutions for immediate implementation.
‘We’re not afraid of turning up the heat a bit with provocation to get commitment to action.’

Steve Mostyn
Associate Fellow,
Saïd Business School,
University of Oxford
Workshops are organised into six phases. Each explores a particular aspect of the Wicked Problem and generates outputs which accelerate progress.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Understand</td>
<td>What is the current situation?</td>
<td>Enhanced understanding of the situation</td>
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| 2. Define   | What is the long-term goal? What is the context? What are the key challenges? | Statement of the long-term goal  
Drivers and barriers  
Key ‘design challenges’ |
| 3. Sketch   | How many different ways might the challenge be tackled?                   | List of ideas  
Create a ‘sketch’ of preferred ideas |
| 4. Decide   | Which ideas show the most promise?                                        | Team feedback  
Select idea for further development |
| 5. Prototype | How might we present this option to get meaningful feedback?               | A ‘good enough’ prototype                                   |
| 6. Validate | What do relevant people outside the team make of it?                      | Presentation of prototype  
Interviewee reactions and feedback data |
Long term goal
System map
Design challenges

Individual ideas
Group evaluation
Preferred option(s)

Prototype
Presentation
Validation
Our principles

1. Constraints bring out the best in us.
   Great work happens when we face big challenges under tight timelines.

2. Collaboration is key.
   Nobody knows everything, but everybody knows something. When we share knowledge, we solve problems.

3. Conversations must lead to action.
   Too much time is wasted in endless cycles of debate.
Reimagining affordable housing in the UK – a sprint in action

The problem

The UK is in the midst of a national housing crisis. Housing supply is low. Mortgage deposits are high. Rentals are unaffordable. Social housing is unavailable. And homelessness is on the rise.

At the same time, public officials face obstacles to tackling this issue - ranging from tightening budgets to entrenched interests, party politics, restrictive regulations, and conflicting interests across all segments of British society.

The participants

A small cohort of industry leaders made a public commitment to bring new thinking on the housing crisis to the UK government. Recognising that traditional approaches to policymaking and innovation were moving too slowly, they turned to Saïd Business School for help in generating new ideas and fresh thinking from a range of perspectives.

The programme

After a series of sessions with the group, Professor Andrew Baum realised it needed much more than new research to tackle the issue. He proposed a sprint approach to overcome the challenges that have dogged the housing sector for years.

In partnership with experts in housing, Saïd Business School designed a three-day custom programme that focussed on five priorities:

1. **reframing the challenge** from ‘solving the affordable housing crisis’ to a more specific, measurable, and meaningful objective. Namely, ‘how can we produce an extra 100,000 homes a year in ways that generate wider community benefits and sustainable economic growth?’

‘Traditional policymaking and innovation are often slowed and hampered by organisational inertia or entrenched perspectives. Our method effectively breaks through those barriers in a matter of days.’

Andrew Baum
Professor of Practice, Future of Real Estate Initiative,
Saïd Business School, University of Oxford
2. **convening the right experts**
   which included more than 50 practitioners, government officials and academics from all sides of the issue. This included property developers, housing association members, urban planners, architects, economists, real estate professionals, investors, journalists and community advocates.

3. **using research to inform action** by commissioning three new papers on the housing crisis from leading academics at Oxford University, the London School of Economics, and University College London. Each paper was shared with attendees as a pre-read and then presented live on Day One of the sprint.

4. **exploring provocative angles**
   using four top Oxford Saïd professors to deliver lectures on relevant topics, including systems change, poverty mapping, scenario planning and economics.

5. **expertly guiding the process**
   end-to-end using a skilled facilitator with 30-plus years of experience, including a role at the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Illustrators also captured the discussions visually in real time.

Next steps

Building on this meeting, industry leaders planned to share their ideas at upcoming conferences and publish their findings on both a dedicated incubator website and in an official Oxford Saïd publication.

The objective was to provide actionable recommendations that can be directly adopted by government policy makers.

For more information and to view the research visit [www.sbs.oxford.edu/housing-sprint](http://www.sbs.oxford.edu/housing-sprint)
The Oxford difference

We structure workshops to solve seemingly intractable problems at scale - we know how to build workshops that effectively diagnose, reframe and tackle challenges. We push teams to go beyond the study of problems and give them the tools to pursue real solutions.

We convene thought leaders, practitioners and industry experts from across the eco-system to address an issue - Oxford Saïd has access to networks of renowned experts, research centres, and academics at the forefront of their fields. We can hand-select guests that will challenge, inspire, and provoke our participants to elevate their thinking and deliver breakthrough ideas.

We create innovative learning spaces to enable new thinking and action-oriented solutions – we can generate creative energy, foster collaboration between participants, and encourage an entrepreneurial mindset.
‘Our emphasis is not just on ideas, but on figuring out what works best in the real world and putting it into action.’

Louise Watts
Client Director,
Saïd Business School,
University of Oxford
Don’t wait for change. Drive it.

At Saïd Business School we provide leaders and organisations with a place to evolve – to step back from the intensity of day-to-day operations and to think about the future.

We create bespoke learning solutions that deliver lasting value. In close collaboration with our partners, we co-create tailor-made programmes that inspire teams, empower organisations, drive progress in business and society, and collectively tackle today’s greatest challenges.

Our goal is to ensure learning is translated into action and our educational experiences have a significant impact for individuals as well as their organisation.

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