How DFID can better manage complexity in development programming

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Key messages

- DFID deals with complex problems, which require flexible systems to support testing, learning and adaptation.

- Complex problems do not necessarily require workload-heavy delivery structures, but simpler approaches depend on delivery partners' experience and competence.

- However, programmes that tackle complex problems do require more hands-on engagement and face more workload from inflexible compliance requirements.

We suggest that DFID and similar agencies:

- Pay closer attention to delivery options in programme design, making use of existing options where possible and, where not, fostering local organisations through long-term investments.

- Encourage programme designers to articulate how ambition matches resources and consider 'good enough' design.

- Reduce the burden of compliance by cultivating partner autonomy, reassessing results and value-for-money requirements and promoting more flexible contracting and procurement.

- Plan and prioritise management resources across a portfolio of programmes to make sure they can be focused in the right areas, where the complexity of the problem requires greater engagement.

Introduction

The United Kingdom's (UK) Department for International Development (DFID) is an ambitious government department that is committed to reducing poverty and conflict overseas. Many of the issues on which DFID works are complex; whether focused on climate change, gender equality, health or other priorities, simple solutions rarely exist. And to tackle these complex challenges, DFID staff must interact with unpredictable systems of political, organisational and individual behaviours and incentives.

This demands sophisticated management. Existing literature suggests principles for management that acknowledges and addresses the unavoidable complexity of these challenges: being more adaptive, collaborative and decentralised (Hummelbrunner and Jones, 2013; Head and Alford, 2015) and emphasising learning, autonomy and trust (Gulrajani and Honig 2016; Honig 2018). Accordingly, DFID increasingly recognises that complex problems require flexible systems to support testing, learning and adaptation.

However, structural questions of management remain. When, how and why should DFID deploy their staff resources? How can DFID design and approve programmes with ambitious goals but realistic management requirements? These questions are especially pertinent as staff numbers at DFID have not kept pace with the growth of the department's overall budget (IDC, 2017).[1]

There is a risk that complex problems spur more complicated programmes; that the complexity of development challenges is addressed through designing programmes with too many projects and implementers. While there may be valid reasons for this, too many of these complicated programmes will overburden staff. In extreme cases, programme design can exacerbate unpredictability; for example through long supply chains or pushing implementers to work in new ways. In these cases, the risk is not just higher workload programmes, but programmes that may not be delivered effectively.

This briefing note is the outcome of an ongoing process[2] within DFID to confront these issues and answer the question: **how can DFID design and manage programmes to address complex development challenges without creating too much staff workload?**

The object of our analysis is the management workload of programmes. This includes: the management time that programmes require from DFID staff; the types of management tasks involved; the complexity and unpredictability of these tasks; and how all of these factors may vary over the programme life-cycle. We explore how DFID can address complex problems while also ensuring that the management workload profiles of its staff remain reasonable given available resources.

These challenges are not unique to DFID. All international donors are concerned with how to best use their staff resources. The findings outlined in this briefing note will be particularly relevant to other major donors, such as the United States Agency for International Development, that have a commissioning model that is similar to that of DFID. But it will also be of interest to donors that directly implement programmes, like the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), for whom regulating staff workload while tackling complex problems remains a paramount concern.

Method

The analysis is based on a sample of 10 DFID programmes (Box 1), informed by our initial literature review of programme management and complex problems. We sought to select pragmatically a diverse, if not fully representative, range of programmes to reflect elements of complexity in the problems they

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1   According to evidence given to the International Development Committee by DFID's Permanent Secretary, over the last five years staff numbers at DFID have grown by 23% while the overall budget has grown by 33%. The Permanent Secretary described using budget growth for 'driving efficiency' (IDC, 2018).

2   This briefing is an output of a collaboration between ODI, DFID and Brink called LearnAdapt, which seeks to support DFID and its partners to work in more adaptive and politically smart ways. Find out more at https://medium.com/learnadapt

address and/or in their notably complicated or unusual delivery structures.

For each programme, we conducted an initial document review, followed up by an interview with the current Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) of the programme. In some cases, we conducted a further interview with one of the former SROs. The interviews sought to identify the main areas of management workload and broader delivery challenges currently present in their management of the programme. We also draw on reports by the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI) and the UK Parliament's International Development Committee (IDC), institutions tasked with holding DFID accountable, making them two of the few sources of in-depth analysis of DFID organisational structures and management.

By interviewing DFID staff and reviewing DFID documents, this research is limited to describing the management workload of programmes from a DFID perspective. The management workload for downstream implementers, including that created through interactions with DFID, is also important for the effectiveness of development programmes. However, as a DFID focused piece of work, this was beyond the scope of this research.

What determines the workload profile of a programme?

Across the programmes studied, our analysis identifies three variables in design and management that determine DFID staff workload: (1) the delivery structure; (2) the management approach; and (3) the burden of internal compliance requirements.

Delivery structure
In terms of programme delivery structure, two key decisions shape workload.

Box 1   Sampled DFID Programmes

Programmes designed to respond to a complex problem:

- governance programme seeking policy and systems change around transparency and corruption in one Asian country with three components, one of which is an issue-based adaptive programme
- large humanitarian programme in an African country working through 12 service providers
- programme with three components to improve civic engagement in one Asian country, with one component an issue-based adaptive programme
- accountable grant supporting a single agent in one Asian country to fund multiple smaller interventions and organisations working on rights and empowerment of marginalised people.

Programmes that have delivery structures with many elements:

- water and sanitation programme across 12 countries, through two consortia and one additional service provider, including using a Payment by Results modality
- rural roads programme in one Asian country with additional components related to livelihoods, and with separate service providers delivering components
- pilot programme supporting an initiative to transform public-private sector relations in the agricultural sector across Africa.

Programmes that have an unusual delivery structure:

- global education research programme with multiple inter-related components, managed through a bespoke unit
- support to an existing multi-donor trust fund supporting projects in an ongoing conflict context
- programme working regionally and across six countries in Africa through a special purpose vehicle to reform regional trade.

Note: Many programmes fit under multiple categories.

First, whether to have single or multiple partners. Management workload is often increased by contracting more than one service provider. In the programmes studied, this happened when no single entity could tackle the ambitious challenges identified – either because no single supplier has enough geographical coverage or because the programme's theory of change required interventions at multiple levels or across diverse sectors. As one SRO noted:

> Fundamentally it is more complex to manage … There are two different drivers of the extra management. One, just the brute extra programme management of working with more partners; and two, the strategic element of ensuring coherence in terms of what they're trying to achieve.

Having multiple organisations puts less strain on a single contractor, allows regional diversity and greater reach but all at the expense of greater DFID management time. This is likely necessary in multi-country programmes, as not every service provider will have operations across the relevant countries.

The second relevant decision about delivery structures is whether to use an existing or new partner. For certain types of ambitious challenges, programmes could move much of the management workload on to a single, trusted organisation. In one humanitarian programme DFID bought into an existing multi-donor trust fund, with much of the day-to-day running of their subgrants contracted out. This single-organisation approach works particularly well when management workload is transferred to trusted local agencies that are better placed than DFID staff to do the work. For example, in one governance programme, grant management and a significant portion of government engagement was moved to a local organisation that could navigate the political context more effectively than DFID. Where DFID trusts the strategic and managerial capacity of an organisation, it can free up its own staff to focus on strategy and policy influencing.

In other contexts, there may not a readily available partner to do the job. In these cases, some programmes studied established a new organisation or management structure. This can be time consuming and difficult: relationships need to be created; the financial, administrative, management and other processes set in place; and policies developed. In the short term, DFID will need to maintain close oversight and sometimes make decisions at the strategic, tactical and even operational level. Longer term, these new structures may be beneficial: two of the programmes studied involved working with organisations that had been founded by DFID many years earlier.

Management approach: engaged or hands-off?

There is growing interest within DFID and other donors in programmes that test, learn and adapt as a response to complex problems. However, our case studies suggest that adaptive approaches require greater hands-on engagement and management time. Both strategic and tactical engagement are likely to be more needed in the early stage of adaptive programmes, particularly where the implementer is new or not used to working in an adaptive way. This cuts both ways: an adaptive approach may be more time-consuming for an inexperienced DFID advisor, who needs to negotiate new and sometimes contradictory systems, while providing some oversight and guidance to an implementer.

A project need not be explicitly adaptive to require hands-on DFID staff time. In one rural roads programme, a considerable amount of adviser time is spent on managing the relationship with the government and private local contractors. This is essential to manage the risks inherent in a high financial value project of this kind, which include political capture and local level corruption or conflict over contracts. In another programme, DFID decided to become more hands-on with a long-term partner because the context in which they were working had changed drastically and they wanted to influence how it now operated. In general, if a programme aims to influence implementing partners to work in new areas and ways, then it is likely to require substantial management engagement from DFID.

Burden of internal compliance requirements

Much of the compliance DFID staff face is unavoidable; it is part and parcel of being a

government bureaucracy that must be held accountable to taxpayers. However, DFID has, for some time, understood that its compliance risks creating disproportionate workload: its Smart Rules, introduced in 2014, reflected admirable progress towards mitigating this. But we find that considerable compliance-related workload remains. Some programmes face a greater burden from these compliance requirements, including those tackling complex problems that inevitably require adjustments of plans and activities. If these changes trigger additional bureaucratic process, then clearly managing adaptive programmes will be more burdensome. Here we highlight the most prominent compliance challenges identified in our case studies.

Contract amendments were deemed particularly workload intensive. Staff in the programmes studied reported feeling under pressure to be as specific as possible upfront in their contracts – even in adaptive programmes – which then led to a drawn-out process when changes to results targets or additional funds were required. One interviewee suggested that the key to minimising workload is designing programmes with the flexibility to adjust without re-contracting (although this can be difficult in practice). SROs described how changing a contract involves many intermediaries and pre-meetings to secure approval, even if the changes being made are common sense.

Due diligence activities, intended to ensure control and visibility over a programme's supply chain, were also a major burden. While DFID does have central framework agreements that aim to reduce reporting requirements for established partners, SROs perceived that central departments still ask for similar levels of information. Some were unclear about what light-touch reporting looks like. Staff on a humanitarian programme noted how a similar level of due-diligence workload is required even when working with established partners: 'We are funding [UN agencies] at a global level for hundreds of millions of pounds. Is there not a way we can simplify this and reduce the burden on country offices?'

Shifting results frameworks, theories of change and strategic planning are quite bureaucratic processes, which sometimes have contracting implications. As is well established in the literature, this typically leads donor staff and implementers to 'play the game'. This means populating the results templates that match their original plans but deviating from those plans in practice to be more effective (Eyben et al., 2015). The tools and approaches for managing results adaptively are not mainstreamed in DFID, and even where adaptive results frameworks are accepted, there is typically high levels of staff engagement in managing and overseeing adjustments. One SRO felt they had to 'at least meet the team leader once a week' – a schedule of engagement that was 'pretty intensive'.

Finally, **the delivery structure** itself can increase or decrease **the burden of** compliance: more partners can mean more contracts, due diligence and results frameworks to manage.

The political, organisational and individual drivers of increased workload

The determinants of workload outlined in the previous section are not simple policy choices: they are driven by political, organisational and individual factors. To tackle complexity and reduce workload, it is critical that these factors are understood. We do not make any value judgements about these factors in this briefing note but simply point out how they shape workload.

Political

Domestic political incentives can shape which delivery structures and modalities DFID favour. For example, DFID's political and bureaucratic leaders have emphasised the need to **increase supplier competition**. This can result in competitive procurement processes being undertaken despite DFID advisers knowing the limitations of the market, or ideal suitability of partners.[3] One programme studied was required to hold a competitive tender, even though the procurement was for a two-year extension to

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3   Here, DFID is subject to UK public procurement regulations and European Union (EU) Procurement Directives, which require fair, open and transparent international competition (ICAI, 2017).

a programme running for nine years with the same partner. The push for more competition can discourage working through existing delivery structures, instead favouring new approaches. Other delivery structures that are light on programme management workload, such as budget support to governments, have fallen out of political favour.

The impetus for more substantial due diligence procedures can also be traced to a political drive for **greater control and visibility of supply chains**. DFID's 2017 Supplier Review, started by then Secretary of State Priti Patel in response to scandals around aid contractors, has increased the due diligence workload required of DFID staff. It requires DFID staff to assess suppliers in six key areas: value for money and governance; ethical behaviour; transparency and delivery chain management; environmental issues; terrorism and security; and social responsibility and human rights (DFID, 2017). This can also exclude potential delivery options. In a blog post, Bond, the UK network for organisations working in international development, wrote:

> As it stands, the stringent government requirements placed on suppliers, which have only been exacerbated by DFID's Supplier Review, lead to exclusion of smaller NGOs, SMEs and other organisations who struggle to reach the bar. (Abrahamson, 2018)

An increased **demand for quantifiable and predictable results** emerged from 2007 onwards as officials were astonished by the lack of data and measurement in the department (Valters and Whitty, 2017). Yet this demand was primarily driven by Douglas Alexander, and later Andrew Mitchell, who were concerned about accountability to taxpayers at a time when only DFID and the Department for Health had ringfenced budgets.

Organisational

At an organisational level, a **burdensome approval process** for programmes incentivises workload-heavy delivery structures. Since 2010, programme design has fed into business cases for programme approval that provide detailed

rationale for choosing a given intervention. The business case made the case for programme approval as well as setting out implementation arrangements. Ministerial approval is required for programmes valued above £5 million, with those over £40 million also having to be assured by an internal unit and submitted to both a junior minister and the Secretary of State. There are additional steps for 'novel and contentious' programmes, or those over £100 million.

Preparing these business cases can be very time consuming – particularly as DFID advisers are anxious for it to be approved by ministers first time. If programme length is short, as it was in one humanitarian programme studied, staff management time can be engulfed by a constant cycle of writing new business cases and extensions, with little time for technical engagement. To avoid a burdensome process, advisers will often bundle numerous projects into one business case or bring in new projects under an existing programme umbrella.
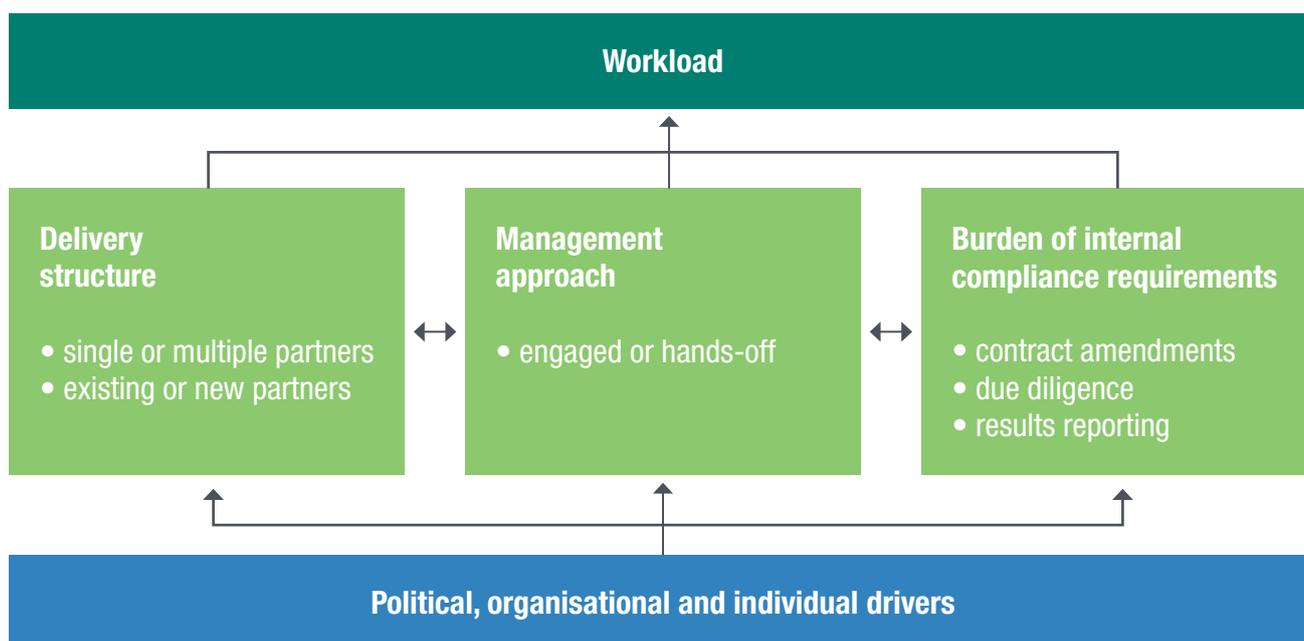
Recently, this programme approval process has changed. For most programmes Ministers will now approve a much shorter concept note, before detailed design in a business case. The emphasis in the business case will now be on how the programme will be implemented, rather than making a case for approval. This may give more space for considering the workload implications of programme design.

Political influences also filter down into organisational processes. For example, according to the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI), a narrow interpretation of **value for money** in terms of economy and efficiency may be driving choices of delivery channels and modalities, rather than a more reflective consideration over development effectiveness (2018). More fundamentally an organisational disconnect between central DFID and DFID country offices can drive workload. One staff member described how a general lack of trust between central DFID and delivery teams results in increasing compliance requirements, which 'just slows things down'.

Individual

Ultimately, many design and management decisions that influence workload stem from

Figure 1   The drivers of workload in DFID programmes

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│                              Workload                                     │
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│ Delivery         │  │ Management       │  │ Burden of internal       │
│ structure        │◄►│ approach         │◄►│ compliance requirements  │
│                  │  │                  │  │                          │
│ • single or      │  │ • engaged or     │  │ • contract amendments    │
│   multiple       │  │   hands-off      │  │ • due diligence          │
│   partners       │  │                  │  │ • results reporting      │
│ • existing or    │  │                  │  │                          │
│   new partners   │  │                  │  │                          │
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│          Political, organisational and individual drivers                 │
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an individual's **professional assessment of the context and problem.** Advisers might see strategical and operational day-to-day engagement in a programme as necessary, despite it being time-consuming. One bespoke project that was implemented alongside two existing delivery mechanisms 'sucked in a lot of time because of the adaptive approach' yet was described as 'really worthwhile'. Similarly, DFID advisers may generate increased workload by attempting to influence different parts of a system. That may be sensible, based on the need to trial approaches to complex problems. But it may also be based on implausible and disconnected theories of change. It often takes considerable professional knowledge and experience to understand which delivery structure or management approach will be effective, and advisers will often require greater autonomy to make such decisions. (One caveat, however, is that some DFID staff may be inadequately trained to manage programmes at this scale.)[4]

Strategies to reduce management workload

DFID cannot reduce workload effectively without understanding what determines and drives it. Given the findings from our analysis, we identify four strategies that aim to demonstrate how to reduce workload while maintaining an effective management response to complex problems.

Strategy 1 Focus more on delivery options in programme design

We find that a complex problem does not necessitate a workload-heavy delivery structure if reliable and experienced delivery options can take on management workload. Programme design should be orientated more around existing delivery options, instead of ideal theoretical interventions; intervention contracting should be less separate from its design. To do this, DFID could hold more frequent Early Market Engagements with suppliers before ministers approve the programme or should be able to return to the business case if market

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4   One staff member described how DFID lacks staff trained to be programme management specialists: "We don't have proper management training. We don't do PRINCE2 training. We can't do Gantt. We don't have a database system."

options are unavailable. Success will depend on doing this without overly complicating the procurement process.

For problems DFID wants to address where no suitable delivery structure exists, DFID should consider the value of **fostering organisations who can have a sustainable and long-term role in the development of specific countries**, including state agencies. Developing these organisations should be valued in of itself, and the up-front workload implications of doing so balanced against the potential long-term pay-offs for workload and development effectiveness. This requires a degree of culture change towards sticking with effective partners rather than always being driven by competition. More broadly, it involves assessing strategically the kinds of change that it wants to see over the next 5–10 years and beyond and looking to develop or support partners who share those objectives.

Strategy 2 Approve programmes dependent on realistic resourcing, not maximum ambition

Programmes should only increase ambition when they have the right resources – including trusted potential implementers and DFID staff time. When multiple interventions are bundled into one programme, or a programme's mission creeps over time, care must be taken to ensure this is done for reasons of effectiveness, and not just to respond to political or organisational pushes. We suggest that this involves reforming the incentives around programme approval. Programme designers should be encouraged to articulate how management resources and ambition match up. This may involve going for a 'good enough' programme goal where there is an existing mechanism to deliver it, rather than pursuing an ideal approach that would require a bespoke delivery mechanism. Ultimately the burden of the approval process should be simplified. While programme approval remains cumbersome and time intensive, multiple interventions will likely continue to be bundled into one programme to save time.

Strategy 3 Reduce the burden of compliance requirements

Our interviewees suggest that standard compliance procedures create a disproportionate workload for programmes that are tackling complex problems in more adaptive ways. To reduce this workload, we suggest three areas for DFID to prioritise.

Firstly, the **effectiveness of results and value for money requirements**. Where DFID and implementers are encouraged to treat complex problems in a simple manner, the result is duplication of workload and misleading internal and external communication. Ensuring that the DFID corporate view of results and value for money encapsulates the bigger and longer-term changes it works towards could reasonably be expected to reduce workload. There are some suggestions from senior leaders in DFID as to how this could happen (Gnanendran, 2017).

Secondly, promoting more **flexible procurement and contracting systems** fit for complex problems. This may mean modifying existing contracting mechanisms to permit easier flexibility or thinking more creatively about alternatives. Donors such as the United States Agency for International Development have been doing this and DFID would do well to follow their lead (Pryor, 2018). The emerging evidence on Payment by Results, for example, is mixed (Clist, 2018). It is therefore critical that DFID finds contracting models that are fit for different delivery approaches, rather than defaulting to this increasingly popular model.

Thirdly, **review the effect of compliance demands on external partners**. DFID staff can only substantially pass on workload to partners, as suggested in Strategy 1, if doing so does not create excessive oversight requirements. If DFID requirements encourage partners to focus on compliance at the expense of front-line delivery, then programme effectiveness could also be threatened. We suggest that DFID aim to strike a careful balance between justified assurance and oversight and appropriate partner autonomy.

Strategy 4 Prioritise management resources across a portfolio of programmes

We suggest that DFID think more strategically about staff deployment at the portfolio level. Ultimately this requires prioritisation: attempting fewer programmes, and projects within them, while increasing management time in the right areas. ICAI's (2018) review of value for money similarly

suggests the need for cross-cutting objectives at the country portfolio level. DFID needs to make a clearheaded appraisal of where staff time can make the most impact given the delivery options available and the UK government's diplomatic clout. As one DFID staff member put it: 'This is about the creation of influence, not just burning through resources in 20 programmes.'

At the country level, DFID could seek to explicitly balance the different roles it plays in programmes – sometimes as an investor of funds, with responsibility to identify the opportunity, design and procure, coordinate the delivery apparatus and manage assurance; and sometimes as actors in the implementation, where their expertise and diplomatic influence are key inputs into the programme. DFID has rarely been explicit about the need for (and staffing implications of) the latter approach. This requires more flexibility in budgeting assumptions. A fixed ratio of programme management time to frontline delivery time across all programmes doesn't reflect the different levels of management engagement that different programmes need to be effective.

Conclusion

Development donor agencies must confront, not ignore, the complexity of the challenges they face. But this doesn't necessarily mean that the programmes designed to address these challenges need to become ever more complicated and staff workload ever more burdensome.

This briefing note suggests some general considerations for other development agencies grappling with the managerial implications of addressing complex problems.

First, agencies should pay greater attention to **partners,** and consider the most effective balance of management kept in-house and management passed on. This includes balancing desires for oversight and assurance with trust and autonomy as much as appropriate. Adaptive programmes may need strategic direction from donors, but also the space to learn and iterate.

Second, agencies should be clear on the desired **roles** of management. In some cases, effective management may simply be efficient management – that is, distributing funds with the minimal possible overhead costs. Other circumstances, especially complex problems, require a greater level of engagement. An effective approach will understand what the ambition of different programmes requires of management, and strategically distribute staff resources to meet these demands.

Thirdly to orientate solutions around **incentives**. In the cases studied, excessive workload did not usually appear as a clear result of design or management misjudgements. Instead, decisions that created workload were responding to incentives – for greater oversight of supply chains, competition between suppliers, ambition and more. Structuring management more effectively in the face of complexity requires working with and around these political and organisational drivers.

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Appendix 1 Indicators of management workload

One key suggestion based on our research is that agencies should prioritise staff resources towards those programmes that require more management time (and away from others that don't). With a limited sample and without quantifying workload, we cannot definitively assess how much management a programme requires. However, we suggest the following indicators as a starting point for comparing staffing requirements across programmes.

Source of workload	Indicator	Lower workload	Medium workload	Higher workload
Delivery structure	No. of components	1	2	3+
	No. of partners	1	2–3	4+
	Novelty of intervention for partners	Very experienced in conducting this kind of intervention	Some experience in conducting this kind of intervention	No or little experience in conducting this kind of intervention
	Established or bespoke delivery structure	Finance is a contribution to existing mechanism	New consortium or team created by established partners	Bespoke management structure created from scratch
Management engagement	Strength of prior evidence base	Very strong evidence base	Some evidence base	Little or no evidence base
	Likely need to shift approach	Minimal likelihood of need to change	Likely to change; changes of some significance	High likelihood of extensive need for change (recognised or not recognised)
	Importance of political economy to success	Low importance that powerful actors come on board	Moderately important that powerful actors come on board	Crucial to include powerful actors
	Desired influence over partners	Partners given autonomy, DFID oversight only	Strategic guidance and approval for partners	Influencing behavioural change in partners
Internal compliance requirements	Flexibility of contracts	Substantial changes to programme possible without re-contracting	Re-contracting only necessary for changes unlikely to occur	Re-contracting necessary for changes likely to occur
	Contextual risk	Low risk environment	Medium risk environment	High risk environment

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