When There Is No Framework: Building Programme Governance From Scratch in Funded Research Environments [1]

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Abstract

Governance failure in funded research programmes is commonly treated as a management problem: the wrong approach, the wrong tool, or insufficient oversight. This article argues that it is a structural one. The delivery infrastructure required to run a complex, multi-partner programme does not emerge when funding begins. It has to be built deliberately, by someone who has first understood what the specific environment actually needs. Most practitioners skip that step. They import a framework, select a tool, or replicate a structure from a previous role. The system is implemented. It is not adopted.

This article introduces the Diagnose-Design-Sustain sequence, a practice-derived approach to constructing governance from scratch in funded research environments. It is grounded in direct delivery experience across two nationally funded UK research programmes managed concurrently at Swansea University between August 2024 and August 2025: the UK Mental Health Mission, funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), and the DATAMIND Trusted Research Environment, funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

The central argument is that the first act of governance is not design. It is a diagnosis. What failure looks like in this specific programme, from the perspective of each stakeholder group, must be understood before any governance architecture is built. The evidence presented shows what that sequence produces when it is followed: 100% funder reporting compliance maintained throughout both programmes, on-time researcher delivery improved by approximately 30%, the DATAMIND Trusted Research Environment delivered live in July 2025 on the target date set at programme outset, and £4,000 in annual tool cost avoided through diagnostic-driven decision-making.

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Programme governance, Funded research management, Research programme delivery, Governance design, Diagnostic methods, NIHR, UKRI, Higher education management, Project management practice, Delivery infrastructure

1. Introduction

Governance failure in funded research programmes is not usually caused by the wrong people being in the room. It is caused by the absence of a room entirely. The delivery infrastructure required to manage a complex, multi-partner programme, including the milestone structures, reporting cadence, ownership clarity, and escalation pathways, is routinely missing at the point a programme manager arrives. This is not an isolated oversight in any particular institution. It is a predictable consequence of how research is funded, designed, and initiated. The people hired to do the research are not hired to build the governance. And the people hired to manage the programme frequently arrive after the environment is already in motion, with active funder obligations, engaged partners, and informal working arrangements already in place.

This article draws on direct programme delivery experience across two nationally funded UK research programmes managed concurrently at Swansea University between August 2024 and August 2025. The programmes operated under different funding regimes: the UK Mental Health Mission under NIHR, and the DATAMIND Trusted Research Environment under UKRI. Together, they involved seventeen partner organisations spanning academia, NHS bodies, and national data infrastructure institutions, including HDR UK, SAIL Databank, and King's College London. Both programmes began in the same condition: active funding, engaged partners, and no functioning governance architecture. Neither was unmanageable. They had simply not been built for delivery. The contribution of this article is specific. It introduces the Diagnose-Design-Sustain sequence, a practice-derived approach for constructing governance from scratch in funded research environments. Its value lies not in adding new governance components to an already crowded field, but in the order in which governance is constructed when the programme is already in motion, and the usual setup window has passed.

Most practitioner guidance assumes a baseline level of structure already exists. The APM Body of Knowledge treats governance design as an activity that precedes delivery, something established during programme setup before obligations begin (Association for

Project Management, 2019). It does not address what a programme manager should do when they arrive after that window has closed. That is a materially different problem. It is also a more common one than the current literature reflects. Kerridge and Scott (2018), in a cross-national study of research administration roles, found that programme management functions in funded research are frequently under-resourced, ambiguously scoped, and positioned as support rather than as core infrastructure. The consequence is predictable: delivery begins before the systems required to sustain it are in place.

The central argument of this article is straightforward. The first act of governance is not design. It is a diagnosis. Understanding how a programme actually operates, across stakeholders, decision pathways, reporting behaviour, and informal working practices, is a necessary precondition for any effective intervention. When this step is skipped and pre-existing frameworks are introduced without adaptation, the outcome follows a consistent pattern: partial adoption, performative compliance, and systems that are worked around rather than used. The issue is not the quality of the framework imported. It is the misalignment between that framework and the environment into which it has been placed without prior understanding.

2. The Structural Gap

Funded research programmes are designed to produce research outputs. They are not designed to be delivered. Funding decisions are made on research quality, methodological rigour, and strategic alignment with funder priorities, which are the right criteria for determining what gets funded. They say almost nothing about whether the funded work can be managed once it begins. The operational architecture required for delivery is not built at the point of award. It is assumed to exist, or assumed to emerge. A grant typically funds researchers to conduct the work and a principal investigator to lead it. What it rarely funds explicitly is the role responsible for constructing and maintaining the delivery infrastructure itself. Crawford and Helm (2009) observed that in publicly funded programmes, formal accountability requirements frequently outpace the operational systems available to meet them. The gap becomes visible only when deadlines approach, and by that point, the response is reactive and rarely sustainable.

By the time a programme manager is appointed, often several months after funding is confirmed, the programme is already in motion. Researchers have begun work. Partner organisations are engaged. Informal ways of working exist, even if undocumented, and those arrangements develop their own internal logic quickly because they enable work to

continue in the absence of formal structure. Formal governance, when it eventually arrives, does not replace existing arrangements automatically. It competes with them. A tracker competes with individual task lists. A reporting cadence competes with established communication habits. Whitchurch (2008) noted that professional roles bridging academic and administrative domains in higher education frequently lack formal authority over the work they are trying to coordinate. Programme managers in funded research influence through systems, not hierarchy. When those systems arrive late, both timing and authority work against them.

The absence of governance in a funded research programme is consistently misread as a management failure. The symptoms that accumulate, missed deadlines, unclear ownership, and inconsistent reporting, are treated as local performance problems rather than as evidence of a system that has not yet been built. That misdiagnosis produces predictable responses: increased oversight, additional meetings, and more reporting requests. None of it addresses the underlying condition because none of it is aimed at it. What is missing is not activity or effort. What is missing is the integration layer that connects researchers, partners, and funder obligations into a coherent delivery system. Treating its absence as a management problem produces the wrong response. Treating it as a design condition, something that has to be constructed deliberately for this specific environment, produces the right one.

3. Why Imported Frameworks Fail

When a programme manager arrives in a structureless environment, the rational response under time pressure is to reach for something familiar: a methodology from a previous role, a reporting template that worked elsewhere, a tool the team already knows. This is not poor judgment. It is also where most governance interventions in funded research begin to fail. A framework arrives from a different context, carrying untested assumptions about how this programme operates, how authority flows, how researchers organise their work, and what senior academics actually need to see. Prior success makes importation feel low risk. What it obscures is that the prior success depended on conditions, stakeholder behaviours, authority structures, and informal norms, that are not necessarily present in the new environment.

The failure of imported frameworks is amplified in funded research environments because the conditions they enter differ structurally from most of the contexts for which they were designed. Researchers do not operate as project resources in the conventional sense. Their

work is distributed across multiple institutional commitments and shaped by disciplinary norms that place high value on intellectual autonomy. Expectations such as weekly progress updates or standardised reporting formats are routinely experienced as an administrative burden rather than as part of the work itself. Senior academics occupy a different position again. They carry strategic and reputational risk, but their visibility of day-to-day operational activity is typically indirect, mediated through informal conversations and periodic reporting cycles. A governance framework designed around the sponsor they should be, rather than the one they actually are in this programme, produces reporting structures that nobody uses and escalation pathways that nobody triggers. Multi-partner programmes add a further constraint: no single hierarchy spans all participants, and coordination must be sustained through shared visibility and explicit ownership rather than authority.

Sitting one step earlier than framework selection, however, is a more fundamental failure. The diagnostic phase is simply not performed. Governance interventions in funded research typically follow a compressed sequence: absence of structure is identified, a framework or tool is selected, and implementation begins. The intermediate step, establishing what failure actually looks like in this specific programme, why it has developed in its current form, and what the informal arrangements already in place depend on, is assumed rather than examined. A governance system introduced without prior diagnosis is built on untested expectations. It is implemented, the programme adapts around it, adoption becomes selective, and compliance becomes performative. Most governance failures in funded research do not announce themselves as failures. They persist as activity without coordination, reporting without insight, and effort without shared direction. That difference is almost always traceable to a diagnostic phase that was skipped, not to a framework that was poorly designed.

4. Diagnosis Before Design

Under delivery pressure, framework selection before the programme has been properly understood is not an unusual practice. It is the default. It is also why most governance interventions in funded research environments produce systems that are implemented but not used. The greatest risk in a programme with no delivery infrastructure is not the absence of governance. It is the introduction of governance before the system it is meant to organise has been understood.

Diagnosis in this context does not mean an initial assessment meeting or a kick-off conversation. It means structured one-to-one conversations, conducted separately with different stakeholder groups, designed to surface how the programme actually operates rather than how it appears on paper. In formal group settings, people describe what has been done and what is planned. In structured individual conversations, they describe how work really happens: the workarounds, the implicit assumptions about who owns what, and the gaps that appear in no formal record. Only the second dataset is sufficient to design against.

At the point of entry into the programmes at Swansea University in August 2024, activity was distributed across eleven individuals with no shared mechanism for tracking work, aligning outputs to milestones, or translating progress into funder-ready reporting. A conventional response would have moved directly to platform selection. Structured diagnostic conversations, conducted separately with six researchers and four senior academics before any design decision was made, produced a different conclusion. Work existed, but ownership was implicit. Progress existed, but it was not visible beyond individual workstreams. The system was not empty. It was fragmented. That distinction changes what you build in response. A tool can organise information within a defined structure. It cannot create the structure itself.

The primary diagnostic error in funded research environments is not that conversations fail to happen. They are conducted in a way that produces a blended picture reflecting neither group's experience with accuracy. Researchers and senior academics do not experience the same programme. When asked the same questions in the same setting, each perspective is moderated by the presence of the other. Researchers will not describe a milestone structure as unworkable in front of a department head whose confidence they need to maintain. Senior academics will not articulate funder exposure risk in front of researchers whose morale depends on a sense of collective progress. What emerges from a combined conversation is a version of reality acceptable to express in that room: not inaccurate, but incomplete in precisely the ways governance design cannot afford. Edmondson's (1999) research on psychological safety established that the presence of senior colleagues demonstrably reduces the candour of junior ones. Separating the conversations is not a nicety. It is what makes the diagnosis accurate enough to design against.

Spoken to separately, each group reveals something almost entirely non-overlapping with the other, and that non-overlap is the finding. Researchers experience governance absence

as operational friction: unclear task ownership, no visibility of parallel workstreams, deadlines without sufficient context. They do not name it as a governance failure because they have no framework for what adequate governance would look like from where they sit. Senior academics experience the same structural absence as programme-level exposure: reporting cycles to funders become high-risk events rather than routine obligations, and risk accumulates invisibly until it becomes urgent. The researchers' problem is ownership and visibility. The senior academics' problem is assurance and trajectory. A governance architecture that addresses one without the other will fail at the boundary between them. At Swansea, both conditions existed simultaneously, visible only because the conversations were conducted separately and then read against each other.

Four signals consistently indicate where structural gaps exist. The first is ownership clarity: not who is nominally associated with a workstream, but who genuinely believes they are accountable for its delivery trajectory. The second is visibility: what each person cannot see across the programme that they need to do their work well. The third is decision latency: how long a decision takes when something deviates from plan, and what happens when the usual decision-maker is unavailable. The fourth is the gap between operational reality and reported activity. Flyvbjerg (2006) documented the well-established tendency toward optimistic reporting in project environments, particularly where senior stakeholders are present in review settings. Diagnosis conducted in individual conversations, where candour is structurally enabled rather than suppressed, is what makes that gap visible. Diagnosis is complete when the programme can be described as it actually operates, not as it was designed to. The distance between those two descriptions is precisely what governance must close.

5. The Minimum Viable Governance Architecture

The diagnostic phase produces something more precise than a problem statement. It produces a specification. Once the programme has been understood as it actually operates, the design question changes from "which framework should be applied?" to "what is the minimum structure this environment can sustain and still function reliably?" In funded research environments, governance that exceeds what the context can absorb does not fail visibly. It fades, bypassed in parts, selectively maintained in others, until governance exists only in documentation while the programme runs on informal arrangements beneath it. The architecture constructed at Swansea between August 2024 and August 2025 was not designed to be comprehensive. It was designed to be sufficient.

Most governance interventions begin the design stage in the wrong place. Under delivery pressure, the instinct is to start with reporting, because reporting is what the funder sees. Milestone tables are created, KPI matrices defined, and submission cycles established before the programme has any shared visibility of its own activity. The result is structurally predictable: a reporting layer with nothing coherent beneath it. It resembles governance. It does not function as governance. The correct starting point is visibility. At Swansea, this led directly to the development of a Researcher Tracker built using Microsoft Forms, Excel, and Power Automate. Individual dashboards gave each researcher a clear view of their own commitments and timelines. A master programme sheet, filterable by project, funder, KPI, and workload, gave senior academics cross-programme visibility without requiring constant involvement in operational detail. Automated notifications replaced informal handovers, and task completion triggered confirmation to the relevant senior at the point of delivery. The system was built in-house at no additional cost. Full team adoption followed within weeks.

Once visibility existed, structure became possible. A monthly reporting cadence was introduced, designed around how the programme actually generated outputs rather than borrowed from a template built for a different context. A milestone tracker connected workstreams to funder commitments through defined stage gates. A KPI matrix translated contractual obligations into operational indicators that the team could act on. A RAG-rated dependency log surfaced interdependencies across the seventeen partner organisations early, allowing risks to be addressed at the point they emerged rather than at the point they escalated. Escalation pathways and decision authority were clarified in operational terms only once both visibility and structure were in place. Tool selection was the final step. The tools enabled the system. They did not shape it. Visibility-enabled structure. Structure enabled control. Reversing that order is how well-intentioned governance produces the compliance theatre described in Section 3.

The sustain stage is where most governance architectures fail, even when the design is correct. A system that requires sustained additional effort from a research team will not survive contact with the programme's actual workload. The sustainability test is precise: does the governance live inside how work already happens, or alongside it as a separate obligation? The redesign of the Researchfish submission process illustrates this directly. Researchfish is the national portal through which NIHR and UKRI track research outputs and impact data. Before intervention, the programme required one to two months of concentrated annual effort to compile the required submission data. The intervention did

not attempt to improve the existing process. It removed it. Data fields were mapped in full, and a corresponding form was embedded as a mandatory checkpoint within the existing travel and event funding approval workflow. Researchers submitted the required impact data as part of activities they were already undertaking. Annual reporting became a continuous background process. The submission cycle dropped from one to two months to under one week. No additional enforcement was required because no additional behaviour was demanded.

6. What the Architecture Produced

Entering a programme with active funder obligations, seventeen partner organisations, two concurrent funding regimes, and no delivery infrastructure, the governance architecture produced something that could not have been achieved by improving what came before. What existed before could not be made more efficient. It had to be replaced with something built for the specific conditions the diagnostic had defined.

At the programme level, NIHR reporting compliance was maintained at 100% throughout, with every submission cycle met and every KPI return delivered on time. Reporting functioned as a continuous output of programme activity rather than a deadline-driven reconstruction exercise. The DATAMIND Trusted Research Environment was delivered live in July 2025, on the target date established at programme outset, requiring coordination across governance policy, legal documentation, ethics review, hub-wide consultation, and cross-institutional technical planning spanning all six UKRI Mental Health Platform hub institutions. The dependency log maintained a continuous cross-institutional risk picture throughout, and the TRE went live on schedule because accumulating risk was visible before it became a delivery threat, not after. At the team level, on-time delivery of researcher commitments improved by approximately 30% following implementation. Tasks had owners, owners had deadlines, and deadlines were visible without requiring manual enforcement. At the cost level, the proposed £4,000 annual subscription to a commercial project management platform was not pursued. The diagnostic had established that the underlying requirement was visibility and ownership, not tooling, and the system built using existing institutional infrastructure was not a cheaper alternative. It was the correct answer to the problem the diagnostic had defined. Zero audit exceptions were recorded during the programme, with financial documentation and governance artefacts maintained as a continuous operational standard rather than assembled retrospectively before each submission.

Each of these outcomes is directly traceable to a decision made during the diagnostic and construction phases rather than to any single tool, template, or reporting intervention applied under pressure. A governance system built without diagnosis produces compliance activity. A governance system built from diagnosis produces delivery capability.

7. The Transferable Principle

The structural failure condition described in this article did not originate in funded research. More than a decade before the Swansea programmes, a commercially funded operation running across 200 branches in North India presented the same underlying problem. Activity was continuous, outputs were being produced, but cost data was compiled manually with no unified reporting architecture and no structure connecting branch-level activity to what leadership needed to see. The operation was not ungoverned. It was fragmented. What resolved it was not a reporting tool or a template imported from elsewhere. It was the construction of a reporting architecture from first principles, built only after structured conversations with each of the four zonal heads to establish what information was actually required, at what frequency, and where decision-making was being constrained by the absence of reliable visibility. When the framework launched, adoption was immediate, for the same reason the Researcher Tracker achieved full team adoption at Swansea within weeks. In both cases, the system had been built from the environment rather than applied to it.

Across sectors, the mechanism is consistent. Complexity accumulates faster than the infrastructure required to coordinate it. Activity begins before the systems designed to manage it are in place. Informal arrangements fill the gap and stabilise quickly. By the time formal governance arrives, it is entering a system that already works locally, even when it does not work as a whole. The context changes. The mechanism does not. The Swansea experience establishes that this problem has a repeatable response: not a universal solution, since universality in governance design is precisely what this article argues against, but a repeatable sequencing discipline.

There is a further implication that the outcomes in Section 6 make visible, one that receives limited attention in practitioner guidance. The most consequential governance intervention at Swansea was not what was built. It was what was not introduced. The £4,000 platform was not purchased because diagnostic evidence established that the problem it would have addressed was not the problem the programme actually had. Governance built correctly protects as much by what it excludes as by what it includes. In most programme

environments, governance improvement is treated as accumulation: more reporting, more structure, more tools. The result is frequently systems that are technically complete and operationally oversized, creating precisely the friction they were designed to eliminate.

8. Limitations

The Diagnose-Design-Sustain sequence is grounded in a defined evidence base: two nationally funded UK research programmes delivered concurrently within a single institutional setting over twelve months. Both programmes operated under NIHR and UKRI funding regimes within a UK higher education environment. Practitioners working in other contexts, whether European Research Council programmes, Wellcome Trust-funded consortia, or internationally funded multi-site collaborations, will encounter different reporting logics, different authority structures, and different funder compliance requirements. The sequence is intended to transfer as a discipline. The specific governance components built at Swansea should not be assumed to transfer without adaptation. The architecture was also introduced at a point where informal operating patterns had not yet fully calcified, which created a construction window that may not exist in programmes where informal systems have been running longer. Finally, the outcomes presented followed the introduction of the governance architecture, but should not be interpreted as produced by it in isolation. Programme delivery is shaped by team capability, leadership engagement, and partner behaviour. Governance alters how these variables interact. It does not replace them. A controlled counterfactual does not exist, and that constraint is a defining feature of practice-derived evidence in programme management environments (Crawford and Helm, 2009).

9. Conclusion

Governance failure in funded research programmes is structural before it is anything else. The delivery infrastructure required to manage a complex, multi-partner programme with active funder obligations does not emerge because the right people are in post. It has to be constructed deliberately, by someone who has first taken the time to understand what the environment actually needs. That step is the one most consistently skipped, and everything that follows depends on whether it is taken.

The Diagnose-Design-Sustain sequence is a practitioner's answer to that problem. Its most non-obvious element is not the sequencing itself. It is the requirement that diagnosis be conducted separately with researchers and senior academics, because the governance

absence they experience is not the same problem wearing different faces. It is two structurally distinct failure states requiring different responses. A diagnostic conversation that draws from both groups simultaneously produces an account that is technically accurate and analytically insufficient. Separating them is what determines whether the governance built in response addresses what is actually failing, or what appears to be failing from the most visible vantage point.

Practitioner literature on programme governance is extensive on refinement and largely silent on construction. It addresses how to improve governance where it exists. It offers little guidance on how to build it from scratch in a programme already in motion, under active funder obligations, with informal arrangements already in place. The method introduced here is repeatable. The discipline it requires is specific. The gap it addresses is not going away.

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