

Thinking Governance and Ofsted

From the outset, the Thinking Governance programme was built to deal with deep, foundational issues of governance.

That meant the issues of setting strategic direction, having a strategic focus and role and staying out of management. It meant encouraging governors to raise their eyes to the horizon, see what's there, where they're headed and decide if that's where they actually want the school to go.

But no school can strategise in a vacuum, sitting blissfully unaware of the pressures brought by an inspection framework, especially if they're struggling.

It's much too easy, though, to dismiss thinking governance as being only for schools who have the luxury of time and space, by virtue of being 'good' or 'outstanding'. For those schools, having a strategic vision almost certainly helped them get where they are - but, as Mercedes Benz once noted in training their sales teams, 'what gets you there doesn't keep you there'.

Even in the best schools, the challenge of maintaining high standards and great governance is never addressed once and for all.

Good governance is, it's true, tough to get to when you're using everything you've got to get results improved, to sort the safeguarding crisis, to manage the deficit down or even to recruit a few more governors. These are important, and governors must get to grips with that kind of necessary knowledge. Thinking Governance is intentionally more foundational than that. Every school can - and should - call on the local authority, the diocese or the MAT for those kind of school improvement aspects.

However, at the heart of every improving school is improving leadership and management, and that includes governance as an embedded concept.

The 2016 Ofsted grade descriptors for leadership and management refer strongly to concepts of 'culture', 'expectations', 'creating a climate', 'ethos', promoting 'opportunity' and working with 'external partners'.

These are all aspects of a wider vision, of an aspiration for the school community as a whole. These are the stuff of good governance, and their absence is often noted by inspectors when a school is failing. Equally, their presence is regularly noted by inspectors when a school excels.

So Thinking Governance isn't always easy to make time and space for in schools which are struggling.

But, used well, even just in part, it can help governing bodies in struggling schools to see that there is a horizon, there is potentially a better day and there can be a future in which an inspection of the school concludes that governors have embraced good, strategic thinking and are using that sense of vision to help deliver a better education for all pupils.