

Project Briefing 2: March 2020

Governing Body Strategy Meetings and Away Days

Governing Body Strategy Meetings or Away Days are an important feature of governance practice in the colleges we observed as part of *The Processes and Practices of Governing in FE* project. This briefing considers the key features of these events, their intended functions, and the diversity of practices that our research has found during a year of fieldwork. The project team has spent a year attending governor meetings in eight colleges, two in each of the four countries of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). All eight colleges ran strategy meetings or away days, though this does not mean that they are common practice in every college in the UK.

One of the things that has emerged as important through our fieldwork is the relationship between the formal governing board meetings, and the wider governance space. The latter refers to a set of physical and digital spaces where governance work happens and where decisions are shaped outside of main board and committee meetings.

Against a backdrop of increased scrutiny of governing boards (AoC, 2019) the annual cycles of business that most boards follow can be very full. The amount of material that needs to be covered in a single board meeting can often be considerable. Across the four nations, we have found weighty board papers accompanying lengthy board meetings. The Chairs and Clerks to governing bodies testify to the challenge of getting through all of this material in a timely manner, whilst giving sufficient time for discussion, debate and challenge.

There are a number of things that it appears difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish during formal board meetings. This includes giving governors the opportunity to develop a detailed understanding of changes that are taking place in the management or curriculum of the college; providing governors with opportunities to reflect on the implications of the wider policy context for the specifics of their role in their college; and providing opportunities for governor training and development.



The colleges involved in this study saw some or all of these aspects as things that might instead be partly achieved at a set of events that we refer to here as Governing Body strategy meetings/away days. These events offer concentrated blocks of time, away from board meeting agendas and cycles of governor business, where more in-depth work, sustained thinking and reflection amongst governors can take place. In some colleges such work was also carried out through governor development sessions prior to board meetings, and/or allowed time for more prolonged discussion during main board meetings.

In this briefing we focus specifically on Governing Body strategy/away days, drawing on data from five of the eight colleges in our study, two in England, two in Scotland and one in Wales, where we had opportunities to observe these types of events. We consider what Governing Body strategy/away days involve and how they are organised. We discuss their stated and apparent functions, and we raise a number of questions about the development opportunities that exist in this area of college governance work, and what can be learned from *The Processes and Practices of Governing in FE* project to assist with this.

What are Governing Body strategy meetings/ away days?

A space to think, reflect, discuss and plan

During fieldwork we had the opportunity to attend a set of meetings across five colleges that were described as strategy meetings/away days. The events were variable in length with the shortest lasting an afternoon and the longest lasting two and a half days. Attendees at these events typically included a mixture of governors and members of the college senior leadership and management team. In some cases there were additional speakers from external organisations, invited to give some perspective on a particular issue or on the wider policy context.

There was diversity in terms of how these events were arranged. Most colleges opted to use college sites, venues and catering facilities for these meetings. One college opted to continue a long-standing tradition of hosting the event away from the college, at a hotel in another city. There were different rationales for these decisions. The difficult financial context was called upon to justify decisions to remain in-house. However, the importance of rewarding unpaid volunteer governors¹, and of providing the space and opportunities for relationships to develop between and amongst governors and college leadership staff, underpinned the decision to leave the college site. Such decisions speak to the various intentions, aims and priorities colleges have for these events and their different positionings in local, regional and national public and policy discourses and traditions.

Functions of governing body strategy meetings/away days

Enabling governors to make a genuine contribution

Throughout this briefing we refer to both Governing Body 'away days' and 'strategy meetings' in order to reflect the language used across the colleges to describe these events. This different choice of language appeared to reflect differences in the perceived purposes the events may have. In all colleges, the events were positioned as a rare and crucial opportunity amidst busy annual cycles of business, to do a range of important things. We identified five key functions, which we list below with illustrative examples from colleges:

¹ College governance is a voluntary role in England and Wales. Chairs in Scotland are remunerated and college governors in Northern Ireland are remunerated for scheduled governance meetings and approved events.

Understanding the changing college environment

In one college a 2-hour session was dedicated to providing governors with a detailed overview of the reorganisation of college faculties. The emphasis here was on conveying the rationale for this reorganisation, both in terms of modifying the curriculum to ensure continued relevance to local labour markets, and important efficiency savings.

Understanding the wider context

In one college an external speaker was invited to speak about the current national policy context for colleges, with an emphasis on financial constraints, student numbers and the shifting regulatory context. The points raised by this external speaker were returned to at several points throughout the remainder of the event, serving as a vital framing for discussions and decision-making.

Consideration of organizational values

One college dedicated a session to reviewing the mission and values of the organisation. There was debate about the language used, whether the mission and values were sufficiently clear, whether they still captured the organisation's aims and values, and what data could be gathered to indicate whether or not the mission was 'working'.

Developing strategy

In one college a senior member of staff drafted a 2021/22 vision for the college, based on prior board discussions and consultation. This was discussed and developed through group work at the strategy event. A series of 'challenge questions' were used to prompt discussion including: Does the strategy accurately reflect the board's ambitions? How would success be measured? This particular methodology for strategising (McNulty and Pettigrew, 1999) appeared to lend itself to a critical and dialogic approach.

Building relationships

All colleges created opportunities during their event to enable and/or encourage governors and college leadership and management staff to get to know one another better. The activities varied and included: tea and coffee and a short break in the middle of the meeting; free time during the event for socialising; a quiz; a drinks reception; a dinner. Wodak et al (2013) argue that 'bonding' is integral to the process through which a group identity emerges in professional settings, which in turn supports motivation for decisions to be reached. This might help us make sense of one of the functions of sustained time together away from cycles of business, and of why some colleges value relationship developing activities such as dinners, free time, and quizzes.

Many of these features were apparent in each of the strategy meeting/away days observed, however, events in the different colleges varied in their priorities and points of emphasis. This is summarised in the table below, where the strength of emphasis given to a particular purpose is indicated by the number of ticks in each box.

Purposes and function of Governing Body strategy meeting/away days

Purpose/Function	College 1 (England)	College 2 (England)	College 3 (Scotland)	College 4 (Wales)	College 5 (Scotland)
Understanding the college	✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓
Understanding the wider context	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Consideration of organizational values	✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Developing strategy	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Building relationships	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓	✓

Developing this aspect of governance practice

Feedback from governors about the strategy meeting/away days revealed avenues for developing these events. One key issue concerned expectation and preparedness. There was a sense that more could be made of these events with more time and preparation. Governors wish to make a genuine contribution, and value having adequate time to engage with materials so that they can provide a meaningful response and engage in critical discussion, rather than being required to respond to important issues 'on the spot'.

The following questions, which arise from our fieldwork and from discussion with our project impact group, offer a stimulus for discussion and development of future directions for Governing Body strategy/away days in colleges.

- What drives the agendas and functions of these events from one year to the next? Does this change or stay the same?
- Does the nature of the event depend on how new/established the governing board is (for example as a result of college mergers, Area Reviews) or how many new members there are?
- Who makes decisions about how the event will run? Who decides where they will be held, what the agenda includes, how discussions or activities will happen, and what the overall purpose is? This question might enable further exploration of the contexts, content and approaches that enable strategy work at these events (McNulty and Pettigrew, 1999)
- In what ways do these events link to strategic decision making? Are these direct or indirect links?
- Are (particular) governors proactive in planning and running these events? What is the role of governors compared to college leadership teams in these events? What do governors see as the purpose of the events?
- Is it useful to ask following each event: What aspects could be changed to improve the value and usefulness of the event for governors?

References

Association of Colleges (2019) The College Insolvency regime – Q&As. Available at: <https://www.aoc.co.uk/news/the-new-college-insolvency-regime>

McNulty, T. and Pettigrew, A. (1999). Strategists on the Board. *Organization Studies*, 20(1), pp. 47-74.

Wodak, R., Kwon, W. and Clarke, I. (2011). 'Getting people on board': Discursive leadership for consensus building in team meetings. *Discourse and Society*, 22(5), pp. 592-644.

This research involves observing *boards in action* in eight colleges of further education across the UK in order to examine how the governing board contributes to achieving the strategic aims of colleges in meeting the needs of learners, employers and labour markets.

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You can find out more about our project at: <https://fe-governing.stir.ac.uk/>



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