

GOVERNANCE beyond silos

TONY BRESLIN and **COSETTE RECZEK** make the case for an all-sector Better Governance Commission

From Kids Company to Carillion, from Rotherham to Rochdale, from Volkswagen to vInspired, there is a common yet often unstated theme: an apparent failure of governance.

Governance failures arise in a number of ways: negligence, fraud, ill-judged financial decision-making, the wrong skill-mix in the boardroom, a meddling board. Sometimes the failures appear to be the result of singular acts or 'rogue traders', although this is rarely the full story. Mostly, errors are manifestly multiple and sometimes profoundly tragic, with results ranging from the farce of last year's Oscar Best Movie mix-up to the still unfolding tragedy of Grenfell Tower.

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Meanwhile, there are many examples of high-quality, professional and committed governance which remain locked within sector-specific communities, and therefore largely unacknowledged and unknown.

This dual failure – to learn from our errors and share our successes – lies behind the #R29 campaign's call for an all-sector Better Governance Commission. Why #R29? Because the idea for the Commission was first aired as recommendation 29 of a report into the future of school governance, *Who governs our schools? Trends, tensions and opportunities*, presented at the RSA in 2017, of which one of us is the author.

Exploring just how strong the commonalities across sectors and settings might be has been the subject of an ongoing series of cross-sector roundtable discussions.

Launched at Parliament in March 2018 and set to conclude in March 2019, the roundtables have been hosted by a diverse range of organisations across the governance landscape: the Institute of Directors, the public sector-focused Non-Executive Academy, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the management consultancy Campbell Tickell, the National Governance Association (the membership body for school governors), the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (representing governance professionals across all sectors), and governance professionals and elected postholders concerned with policing and criminal justice. Building on concurrent sector-specific work, such as the launch

of the new Charity Governance Code and, in the corporate arena, the publication of the Wates Review, each roundtable has addressed four questions:

1. To what extent can those involved in governance across the sectors, particularly as non-executive directors and trustees, learn from each other?
2. What benefits might accrue from such learning and how might we facilitate this sharing of insight and experience?
3. Can we identify a set of sector-agnostic key principles that should inform governance, scrutiny and accountability, whatever the sector, organisational type and focus of activity and, if so, how might we go about this task?
4. Is there greater potential for the transferability of board skills across sectors?

The roundtables have stimulated rich discussion; while acknowledging the distinctiveness of governance in each setting, they have strongly endorsed both the belief that there are commonalities and the case for an all-sector Better Governance Commission.

Encouraged by the diverse range of blue-chip partners who are already expressing interest in our work, we are securing the support (funding, organisational, media and political) to establish the Commission in 2019, with research and reporting to follow. For us, the Commission's objectives are threefold:

1. To facilitate cross-sector learning within the boardroom, such that we build an understanding of the common principles that underpin good governance, whatever the setting
 2. To build governance literacy beyond the boardroom, such that our stakeholders – in this sector, our beneficiaries, staff, volunteers, donors, and funding partners – understand what governance is, how it works and why it is important
 3. To enhance boardroom thought diversity across all sectors, such that we counter the tendency towards groupthink (or perhaps sectorthink) while widening participation, whatever the setting.
- How we exercise governance in our corporations, our hospitals and schools, and our charities is too important to be left to chance, while any (or another) sector-specific review is likely to deny itself the opportunity to learn from elsewhere, and to develop governance literacy beyond the boundaries of its own backyard. Find out more at www.transformgovernance.org.uk and @BetterGovCom 

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