

How to Recover from a Poor Inspection Outcome

Marell
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If you have recently been inspected by Ofsted and it didn't go well, my best advice for you is - get in touch with Marell Consulting Limited– we will help you bounce back quickly. We have done it successfully for every school that has requested this service from us.

If, however, you prefer to address this on your own, here is a strategy you can follow to quickly recover from a poor inspection outcome. I offer this strategy because according to Ofsted statistics, it is more difficult to recover from a poor inspection outcome than it is to get things right the first time. The last time I checked (June 2021), **28%** of schools that had a standard inspection failed to get a grade 2 or better while a massive **57%** of schools that had a progress monitoring inspection failed to demonstrate that they had recovered after getting a poor grade at their last inspection. Schools definitely need support with recovery so here is the strategy - I call it – **"Accept the outcome then follow the 5C's"** The strategy includes the following steps:

- **Accept the outcome then;**
- **Categorise** areas for improvement;
- **Compile** a SMART action plan;
- **Complete** actions as scheduled;
- **Check** progress regularly;
- **Conduct** a final evaluation.

It sounds simple enough doesn't it? Well, your success will be determined by how effectively you implement this strategy.

(I) Accept the outcome

If you have just been inspected and it didn't go well, you are not going to be in a good place. You most certainly feel disappointed, maybe angry, perhaps you don't agree with the outcome and are looking at ways of challenging it. Unfortunately, you can't afford to spend too much time in that state because you will most likely be receiving a progress monitoring inspection soon – sometimes in as little as 5 months! If inspectors found that your school did not meet some of the independent school standards (ISS), they are required to inform the DfE. The DfE will most likely send a letter to the school asking for an action plan to demonstrate how you will address the ISS that were not met. You will have 1 month from the date on the DfE letter, to compile and return this action plan. You will also have a limited time to implement the plan and be ready to demonstrate improvement at the progress monitoring inspection. So, even though you are not feeling great after receiving a grade 3 or 4 from a standard Ofsted inspection, or after getting a poor outcome from a material change/progress monitoring/ emergency inspection, don't waste time questioning the outcome - by the time the inspection report is published, the grades are final.

The best time to make an impact on the outcome of inspection is during inspection. If, during the inspection you think that the inspectors are missing something and are not evaluating your school accurately or fairly speak up immediately. Present additional evidence, give explanations and set things straight. After inspectors leave, you will still have 5 working days to comment on the draft inspection report, the inspection process, and the findings. Ofsted will consider all comments and respond when they share the final report. After this stage, if you still have concerns – your only recourse will be to make an official complaint So, the first step towards recovering from a poor inspection outcome is to accept the outcome and focus on recovery.

(II) Categorise areas for improvement

In order to do this, you need to know where to look and you need to be thorough. You might find this section a bit too prescriptive however I am sharing this with you because this is what I do when I am supporting a school. You can decide if you want to use it. I have found that following this procedure guarantees that all areas for improvement are addressed.

To get the best from this next part you need to be looking at your inspection report.

- Read the report in detail highlight any statement that identifies an improvement area and assign it a number

- Assuming you were present and heavily involved in the inspection, check your notes. Is there anything else that came up as less than good during the inspection but was not mentioned on the inspection report? If so, write it down and assign it a number as well. If you were not present during the inspection speak to someone who was and ask them to give you this information. It is important to record these additional issues even though they were not mentioned on the report because if left unchecked they might develop into a major area for improvement which affects compliance with the standards at the next inspection. This step is especially more important now, under the new inspection framework when inspection reports are a lot shorter than before.

- Now, go to the section of the report titled "Compliance with regulatory requirements" – and under the heading "The school failed to meet the following independent school standards" you will find a list of all the ISS that were not met. Read each standard, then go back to your numbered improvement areas, scan to see if you can match the standard to any of the numbered improvement areas. If you can, add the standard number (in brackets) next to the relevant improvement area. Please note that, if this is being done after a standard inspection, it is possible to find that some improvement areas do not match with any of the un-met standards because during a standard inspection, in addition to checking compliance with the ISS, Ofsted inspectors also evaluate the school according to their own framework. If this happens, categorise those improvement areas as (qualitative)

- Now create a document with all the numbered areas for improvement, grouped according to the relevant standard. If there are any qualitative issues group them together.

- This is the first draft of your action plan

(III) Compile a SMART action plan

When the DfE ask you to compile an action plan you will be given a deadline for sending this back – usually 1 month. The action plan will then be sent to Ofsted for evaluation. Ofsted use the following criteria to evaluate your action plan:

- Does each action have a date for completion?
- Does each action have appropriate measurable success criteria?
- Is the timescale for each action realistic?
- When implemented, are the actions likely to mean that the standard is met?

Based on the outcome of this evaluation, the DfE can approve or reject your action plan. In some cases, an action plan is approved with modifications. So, you need to get it right, not only because your action plan

will be evaluated but also because if you get it right first time, you can be confident that the actions will address un-met ISS and you will have enough time to implement these actions before Ofsted come back for the progress monitoring inspection. If your action plan is rejected, you may be asked to draft another plan - in that case, you will also have to revisit some of the actions that you had already started implementing if Ofsted deems that they are not sufficient to address un-met ISS. This will take up a lot of your time which is already limited.

For this reason, I would suggest that you compile a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound) action plan. I am sure you have heard about SMART targets and are probably thinking, not this again. I am sure you are also aware that even though many people can reel off what they are, they still fail to set SMART targets. I am going to use the principles behind SMART targets to demonstrate how you can get the action plan right.

The DfE have published guidance about action plans here. Your action plan should state the ISS that have not been met, outline actions that will be taken to address these ISS, specify a deadline for completion and explain how you will measure success. The DfE guidance includes a suggested template for an action plan which you can choose to use, see it below:

Action plan submitted under S.114 of education and skills act 2008

School Name: **School Number:**

Standard No	Objective	Action proposed	To be completed by	Responsible person	Costs and resources	Success criteria or outcome

I prefer to use the format below and I will explain why:

Objective	Action proposed	To be completed by	Responsible person	Costs and resources	Success criteria or outcome	Progress
Standard number -						
Standards number -						

There are only 2 differences between the DfE template and the one I choose to use– (i) an additional column for progress I think it is essential to have a progress column to prompt you to check and record progress – otherwise the implementation of the action plan might not be as focused. (ii) Instead of a column for standards, there are multiple rows for standards. The standards have been assigned to rows on the second template for 2 reasons:

- to save space, the table can get quite wide – it is a lot of columns.
- to prevent the need to repeat actions due to standards that impact compliance of other standards for example, let's say your school has failed to make one of the required pre-employment checks specified on standard 18, this means that the school will also fail to meet standard 21 (the one about the single central register – because the register won't have a record of that pre-employment check), it also means that the school will also fail to meet standard 7 (the standard about safeguarding) because you have not followed the latest guidance from Keeping Children Safe in Education. Although all three standards are not met, it is because of one failing – if each of these standards is given a row on the action plan then you would need to repeat the action about carrying out the missing pre-employment check three times which is ridiculous. If you use this template however, you can group these three standards and write down how you will address the single failing that led to non-compliance with all three standards.

So, onto compiling a specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART) action plan. Each area for improvement identified in section (II) should be written as an objective on the template. For each objective state the actions that need to be taken in order for the objective to be met. Make sure these actions are SMART.

Specific - When someone else reads your actions, there should be no doubt about what needs to happen. Here is a little test to check if your actions are specific: imagine someone has just picked up your action plan and read the first action on the plan, will they be able to go and do it without asking you a follow up question? If yes, then great. If not, your action is not specific enough.

Measurable – This is taken care of by drawing up success criteria. The criteria should make it clear how you will know that you have achieved what you set out to achieve. Please be careful with the wording when it comes to success criteria about mandatory issues such as reporting FGM. I know this is pedantic, but I have seen Ofsted feedback saying that an action is not acceptable because the success criteria states that something "should" be done instead of "must" be done.

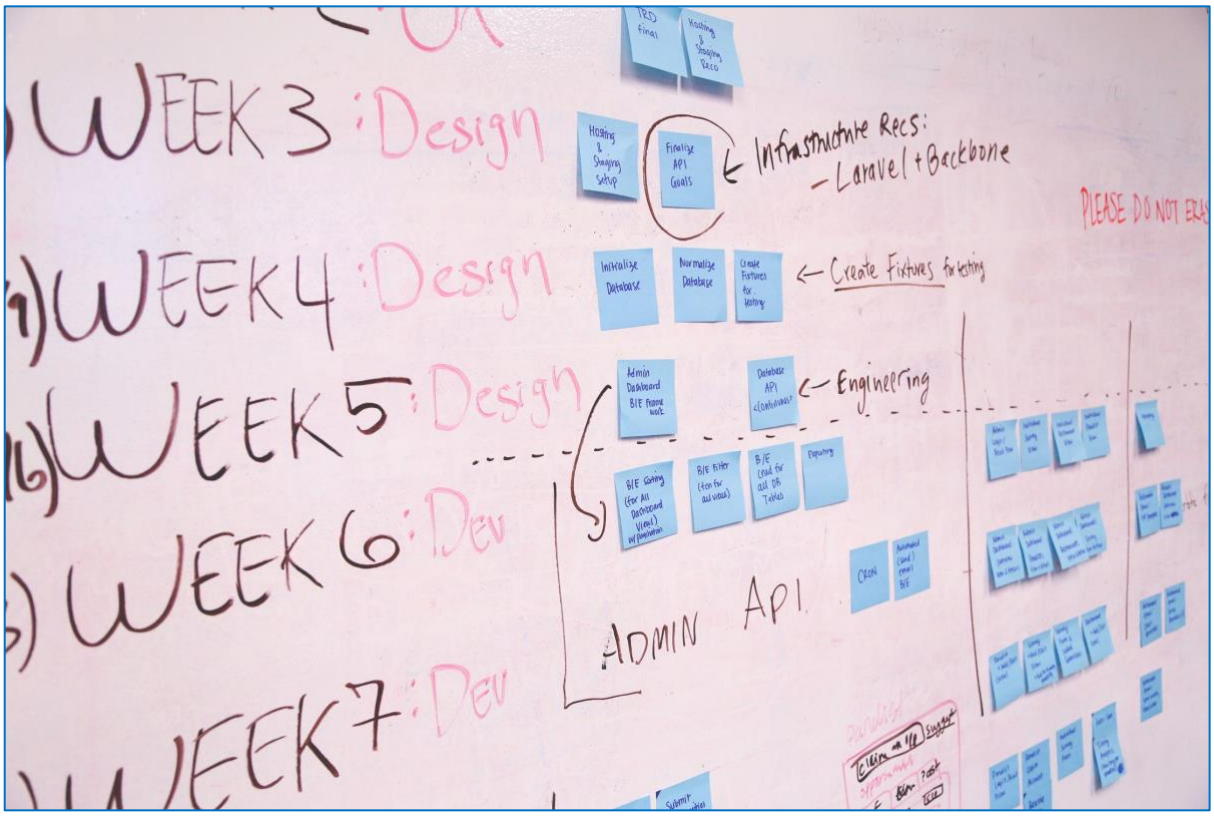
Achievable & Realistic - In order to be sure that your actions are achievable and realistic, it's important to consult those who you plan to assign responsibility for completing actions. Is this person the right fit for the job? Do they have the knowledge, experience or skills required? Do they have the time and willingness to do

it considering their current workload? Can you provide them with the resources they need to complete the task?

Time-bound – This is taken care of by setting deadlines for all your actions. Wherever possible, earlier deadlines are better bearing in mind the limited time in which schools are expected to turn things around. But they must also be realistic. Any standards to do with safeguarding and welfare of pupils should be prioritised because the longer they are not met the longer pupils are at risk. Finally, deadlines cannot be more than 3 months from the date on the DfE letter- the most recent DfE letters give you a specific date.

Number each action – it will make tracking and recording progress easier.

(IV) Complete actions as scheduled



In order to do this effectively you need a driver – someone in the organisation who is good at getting others to do things. By this I mean someone who will remind others when their actions are due, encourage, motivate even inspire others to play their part. Assign such a person as the driver of your action plan. If you are assigned as the driver this is what you need to do:

- get the thickest lever arch folder you can find
- place the action plan at the front of the folder then;
- get several packs of dividers – enough to create a dedicated section for each action on the action plan
- on the front of each divider, write down a list of the evidence that will show that the success criteria for that action are met

At the beginning of each month

- identify actions that need to begin or that need to be completed in that month

- identify the people who are supposed to complete these actions then;
- Do your thing: talk to them, motivate them, encourage them - make sure that they complete the actions. Instruct them to report back to you, giving you the relevant evidence of completion where possible (some evidence cannot fit in a file).

I can't stress enough how important it is to hold people to account here. Make sure that everyone completes the tasks assigned to them no matter what. Implementing this plan is how you get your school back in good standing with the DfE (who – and I hate to mention it here, but I have to, have the power to close your school).

It might help to motivate staff if you have a monthly meeting during which the driver thanks staff for completing their tasks. Each person could mention what they have done to implement the action plan, so all staff know how much progress has been made.

The driver should update the action plan each time tasks are completed – making a note of the date, the action completed and whether or not success criteria are met. This information goes in the "Progress" column on the action plan.

(V) Check progress regularly

This task should be assigned to a senior person who is not the driver. At least every 2 months, check to see which previously un-met standards are now met. To do this effectively you need to understand the requirements of the standards. I would advise that you either read the standards, the DfE guidance and any additional guidance relevant to the standards in question that is signposted in the handbook for inspection or use our Standards Compliance Audit Tool which you can buy here. Sign off standards that are met.

Also check your working action plan document, ensure that the driver has made all updates and that all the evidence is in place in the action plan folder.

(VI) Conduct a final evaluation

If you follow this procedure, there will come a time when you will notice that you have addressed all previously un-met standards and other qualitative issues that needed improvement. This is the time to conduct a final evaluation of your progress. I would advise that you get an external person (like me) to carry out the evaluation, they can be objective because they have not been involved in the improvement process. If you prefer to conduct this evaluation yourself, this is how I do it:

Plan the evaluation carefully, for each area for improvement identified in section (II) draft a line of enquiry based on the specific failing identified at the last inspection then think about how an inspector might check to see if the school has improved. Do this for each area of improvement so that you end up with something like this:

Area for Improvement	Lines of enquiry	Method of evaluation
Behaviour in lessons	How is disruptive behaviour managed now? Are pupils now arriving for lessons on time?	Observation of lessons Analysing documents – behaviour policy, behaviour logs, class registers
Premises	Have repairs have been made? – the ceiling, the plaster, the window and the general state of the premises. Has the missing fire extinguisher been installed? Have the fire escape signs been put in place?	Premises walk
Ensuring that the school meets the standards	What has been done to ensure that leaders and mangers have the knowledge required for ensuring that the school meets the standards?	Talking to school leaders. Analysing documents – minutes of meetings, records of audits or reviews of compliance with the standards

Carry out the evaluation in a formal manner, as if you were an external person. Inspectors complete this evaluation in 1 day – do the same. Inspectors will do the following:

- Check to see if previously un-met standards are now met
- Check to see if any qualitative issues identified at the last inspection have been addressed

If inspectors notice that standards that were met at the last inspection do not continue to be met, they will follow additional lines of enquiry and report to the DfE. In your evaluation, if you notice the same, please make a note of it.

Inspectors will always have regard for safeguarding and will report any concerns to the DfE. In your evaluation, if you notice the same, follow your school's safeguarding procedure.

At the end of this evaluation, you can be confident that your improvement efforts have been successful if you can confirm that:

- All previously un-met standards are now met
- All qualitative issues identified at the last inspection have been addressed
- The school continues to comply with standards that were met at the last inspection

While you wait for your progress monitoring inspection continue to check that standards continue to be met. Download our guidance document about how to ensure consistent compliance with the standards. If you find this guidance useful, we would love to hear from you.