



*Boarding  
Schools'  
Association*

## **TAKING ON A BOARDING HOUSE**

**Reflective Thoughts from Three New Practitioners**

**BOARDING BRIEFING PAPER**

**NUMBER SEVEN**

**SEPTEMBER 2002**

**contributed by**

**Elizabeth Austin, Christopher Calvey and Steven Saunderson**

**THE BSA GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE SUPPORT OF THE**

department for

**education and skills**

creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

**FOR THIS PUBLICATION**

The Boarding Schools' Association  
Grosvenor Gardens House  
35-37, Grosvenor Gardens, London SW1W 0BS  
Tel : 020 7798 1580 Fax : 020 7798 1581  
e-mail : [bsa@iscis.uk.net](mailto:bsa@iscis.uk.net)  
Website: [www.boarding.org.uk](http://www.boarding.org.uk)

## **INTRODUCTION**

*This Boarding Briefing Paper has been compiled from three diaries kept by the authors during their first year running a boarding house.*

*I am grateful to these colleagues for making their diaries available and hope that I have managed to distil accurately their combined experiences into this paper.*

*I trust that their views will be of interest to others.*

**Tim Holgate**  
**BSA Director of Training**

## **The Handover**

Make sure that you can move into your flat or house well before the beginning of term. Having too little time will leave you feeling hurried, anxious and ill-prepared, and tripping over boxes will make the first few weeks of term that much harder.

Ensure that there is an efficient handover of house finances. One suggestion would be that the outgoing HsM should sign his accounts over to the bursar who should then sign them on to the new incumbent. This will ensure a fresh start for the incoming HsM.

If the handover period occurs during the holidays you may well find that it is your matron who will be the only available member of the house team and she will undoubtedly provide a source of official and unofficial knowledge. However it is important to be seen by the pupils as a new HsM with new views and ideas.

## **Pupils**

It is vital that you build up a good working knowledge of the boarders under your care and control. Before the start of term you should study thoroughly their house files. A detailed discussion with the outgoing HsM can also be extremely useful although it may bring with it certain preconceptions and bias. In a prep school, it can be valuable to train as soon as possible a group of senior pupils to be effective dormitory helpers, who understand your expectations and set high standards and a good example.

In a senior school, the sixth form is the most important year group in helping you to manage the house. It is therefore important that you get them on side and that they are supportive of your ethos and ideas for the house. (It may help to have an informal, social occasion right at the start of term; even inviting them back early for lunch before the arrival of the rest of the house.) You may wish to

point out that the HsM/prefect relationship is a two-way process with valuable references to be written at the end of a successful year!

When taking over in September, the outgoing sixth form will often take with them many of the problems in the house and give you a fresh start with a new top year group.

You will inevitably get a problem pupil at some point. Persevere; cover all aspects if necessary with relevant paperwork. Refer it upwards. Ignore all the people who tell you it's not worth spending so much time on this one. Follow good advice and instincts; ignore the rest. Be patient with the parents. It will resolve itself. Often, a year later, he or she will become a model student, and the parents will think you're wonderful, but at the time you may think you will never win through.

Boarding taster weekends, especially for prep school day pupils, work well. They offer the chance for them to see the house, even if they are unlikely to board immediately. They raise the profile of boarding and often pupils will take up places as a direct result of the experience.

### **Planning and Routine**

Plan! Plan again! Have a contingency plan! Have a contingency plan for when that goes wrong! Don't take on a major school commitment (e.g. a play or big trip) in your first term – make sure you are in a supporting not leading role in such activities.

Pupils will enjoy contributing to a Christmas entertainment, including sketches, readings, poems, carols or a fancy dress theme.

Getting involved in the house play (but not directing it!) can be great fun in your first term or year. You get to know pupils really well and create a group of sixth formers who know you and are therefore prepared to be helpful in the future.

Exams! Crisis hits the boarding house. Help them to keep on an even keel and after the first couple of days they usually settle down. After that, it's one long run to the end of term. You might plan a trip to celebrate the end of exams, another year in the boarding house (and, privately, a year's survival!).

The house handbook is a valuable document that will set out your aims and house routine. You can create one using existing documentation and best practice from other sources, and should issue every pupil and tutor with a copy. Inevitably you will wish to re-write it after a year in post but an annual review is a good idea anyway. You might wish to issue the new edition each year to all parents and pupils, old and new.

The job brings with it a minefield of legislation. BSA publications are easily the most concise and 'hands on' in the guidance they offer. Naturally, a close reading of school policies and protocols is vital. It is important to be up to date with any changes to legislation and inspection requirements. Again, BSA publications are most useful. Make sure you have a copy of National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools to hand as a reference source.

Make sure that your car insurance covers you for employer's business should you need to transport pupils.

Don't hold back on getting essential repair work carried out. Keep a record of any such requests and follow up as necessary. It is always positive to be seen by the house as someone who gets things done.

## **Personal**

The position of HsM should not just be seen as a career 'tick in the box'. The pupils in your care will expect you to live their life with them, to be seen to be completely immersed in the life of the house and to support it publicly at every possible competition and event. It is a '24 hour day' position, which can entail considerable inconvenience, and some loss of privacy. Therefore be clear that this is the post for you and also make sure that it is a suitable post for your partner or family, otherwise tensions will occur.

It's very tempting just to flop on your time off (if you're lucky enough to get a significant amount!) – you're tired, fed up, you've got a cold, all your friends work in the week and you don't have weekends off. Resist this. Plan to do something – not so much that you feel harassed but enough to look forward to – and enjoy it. Whatever you do, get yourself out of school for an evening each week if you can: it is sometimes difficult to keep a sense of perspective otherwise.

Often, HsMs have to teach 'bits' of subjects, and possibly those in which you are not a specialist. With luck, a sympathetic head of department will virtually write your lesson plans to start with! Advice – ask for information and help in writing.

Get a big diary - a sort of private log book. Record things such as conversations with parents and other staff, incidents, accidents, pupil concerns, etc. Make sure you have a written letter of appointment and job description that accurately reflects what you agreed to take on. Record the highs as well as the lows – then you can look back and see your progress. When it's all getting you down, go and spend some time with your charges - they will almost always lift your spirits – and they'll remind you why you bother.

Although being on site during the holidays has many advantages, it can mean dealing with numerous issues and requests from pupils and parents from lost kit to feeding a left-behind hamster and watering thirsty pot plants. Ensure you are

relaxed about this, otherwise at the start of a new term, you will wonder where the holidays went.

## **Parents**

Having family functions which involve the boarding parents, such as a music evening, an art exhibition or an evening of sketches performed by the pupils is an excellent way of getting to know the parents in the first year. However, it can sometimes mean being caught by parents who want to moan about other aspects of the school!

Although having a direct phone line to your house is important for boarder parents to contact you, beware of day parents using you as a way of contacting the school 'after hours'.

Remember that some parents will praise you and some will criticise you but the majority will quietly accept your running of the house. Assume these to be satisfied customers!

If you are brave enough, consider carrying out, towards the end of your first year, a confidential survey of parental views about boarding and the house.

## **Staff**

It can be very rewarding seeing the house staff team, especially the matrons, showing initiative and willingness as you develop a greater feeling of ownership and belonging within the house.

The value of having a good and trusted person available as school counsellor is huge.

A new HsM is likely to inherit an existing tutorial team, who will be used to your predecessor's ways. You will need to be sensitive and tactful as you make your expectations clear to them.

## **Communication**

Schools may not always be the most dynamic organisations for communication. However it is vital that HsMs are efficient and concise as they usually form the most important link between school and parents.

If you are unable to give an immediate response to a query, give a holding response and seek advice (but don't forget to follow up soon afterwards!).

It is important to make sure that letters that should be held in school files are copied immediately and held by you as well. Telephone calls are an instant method of communication but always make a brief note of what was said. In certain situations it is wise to follow up with a letter confirming the initial conversation. Consider sending parents a short house newsletter now and again (perhaps by e-mail).

It is important that you are not pressured into authorising exeats requested by pupils without the necessary authority from parents or guardians. Make it clear exactly how you expect exeat requests to be made. Always confirm travel arrangements well in advance.

### **Final Thought**

This is undoubtedly one of the most demanding jobs in education, but it is easily the most rewarding.