

bsa | 60 YEARS OF  
BOARDING  
EXCELLENCE

60 YEARS OF BOARDING AND BSA:  
RESEARCH, REFLECTION,  
AND THE ROAD AHEAD

## Executive summary

This research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding and up-to-date snapshot of UK boarding in light of an often-outdated portrayal of boarding in the media. The aims of this research are to:

- consider historic perspectives
- capture the current strengths and concerns
- evaluate staff and pupil experiences
- study how boarding schools have adapted and must continue to adapt to address concerns such as mental health, neurodiversity and boarders from specific backgrounds.

The research found there have been significant developments in safeguarding and pastoral practice, inclusion, and approaches to discipline. Findings also investigate the balance boarding need to strive.

BSA wishes to thank boarding staff who took part in this research and schools which agreed for their boarders to participate. We also thank the boarders who shared their views and experiences on boarding.

### Legal disclaimer

The contents of this report are the property of BSA Group and cannot be used, copied, photographed, photocopied, circulated or quoted without prior permission. The report is based on data collected, analysed and reported in good faith and every effort has been made to present information and findings accurately and impartially. Conclusions, comments and suggestions made in the report are put forward independently by BSA Group and BSA Group is not responsible for any decisions made by third parties following publication of the survey.

## Scope of this research and limitations

Like any research, this study has limitations. Findings are a snapshot of the current situation in boarding. Small samples of staff and boarders were selected. Therefore, one cannot assume findings represent the feelings of all boarding staff and boarders. There will naturally be variations in people's experiences and the boarding provision on offer.

Although there were responses from several countries, this research mostly references UK-based research as the UK boarding model has been replicated across other areas and much of the literature surrounding boarding revolves around experiences in the UK. While many of the guidance and legislation documents are England-specific, similar guidance is often available in other UK nations.

Staff interview participants were selected randomly from questionnaires or as part of school visits. Boarder samples for interviews were selected by schools. Boarders signed consent forms and were informed that their responses would not be identifiable. Young people are used to speaking to strangers as part of audits and inspections and giving their honest feedback. However, some boarders will no doubt have wanted to put their school in a good light.

## Bias

Although the lead researcher aimed to approach this project with objectivity, they recognise that their own employment, and professional background, may have influenced aspects of the research process. Their work in boarding, pastoral and inclusion fields may shape the way participants' responses are interpreted and certain themes prioritised over others. This may include noticing certain comments more than others due to personal or professional experiences and training. Acknowledging this positionality is essential, as it allows better understanding of the lens through which data was analysed and provides appropriate context for the findings. To mitigate this bias, this paper has been reviewed by colleagues.

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## Methodology

A mixed method approach was taken which provided qualitative and quantitative data. Online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used for boarding staff and for boarders. In total, the research includes the views of 73 boarding staff representing a range of schools and length of service. 102 boarders were surveyed or interviewed in the scope of this project. Due to consent and ethical considerations, all boarders who took part in the research were of secondary school age. UK and international boarders were included although individual nationalities and ethnicities were not recorded.

All interview participants signed consent forms. A thematic approach was used to analyse the data and draw correlations between recurring themes. Secondary data from other BSA Group research projects was also used for reference.

# 1

## Boarding context

It is far easier to find articles and literature featuring negative views of boarding than accounts of neutral, balanced or even positive experiences. Many accounts relate to unacceptable institutional abuse which took place in residential settings. In this research, BSA does not seek to negate or invalidate the experiences of victims and survivors of abuse. It unequivocally condemns the actions of perpetrators and acknowledges the suffering of victims and survivors. BSA remains committed to robust safeguarding training and practices both in the UK and internationally as can be seen in its Commitment to Care charter.

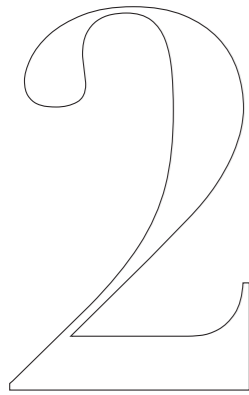
The books most often quoted about the detrimental impact of boarding tend to consider experiences from a time when safeguarding practice and pastoral care were not at the heart of school cultures. This research does not seek to be a point-by-point rebuttal of the points made by various authors and survivors about boarding schools. Rather, it aims to establish a more up-to-date view of boarding and how it has profoundly changed. It also presents the views of boarding staff and boarders.

A headteacher quoted in the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) said that survivors of abuse would not recognise his school as it is today, in relation to their experiences several decades ago. Many who currently work in boarding and indeed current boarders would struggle to recognise their school in the descriptions of boarding schools presented in these accounts.

Boarding has evolved and is still evolving. Boarding numbers have fallen in recent years, and some families today may prefer to have their children living with them, certainly at a younger age. Independent Schools Council (ISC) census figures show this decline in boarding numbers over the years. Figures from the 2025 ISC census show 63,035 boarders in UK independent schools<sup>1</sup>. The 2025-26 BSA State Boarding Census also shows 4,647 boarders in state boarding schools. While boarding may be the only option for some families in the UK Foreign Office or Ministry of Defence, many children board by choice or because their families see the value in a boarding education. Tradition still plays a part in the sense that many parents (domestic and international) see British boarding schools as prestigious.

Schaverien (2015) poses this as a central question raised by former boarders: 'If I was so precious, why then did [my parents] part with me?'. This is a pertinent question, and the answer in 2026 is bound to be very different to that from parents in the 1960s. By collating insights from boarding staff and boarders, this research examines how boarding has evolved, considers what boarders may gain from their time in boarding and by extension, begin to answer Schaverien's question.

<sup>1</sup>At the time of writing, the 2026 ISC Census has not been published yet



## Pastoral care: a culture of rigour and support

Marland (1974) is widely recognised as the first educator to write about pastoral care in the way we recognise it today. He described it as 'looking after the total welfare of the pupil' (p.8) and argued that pastoral care should not be separated from academic work but rather that supporting pupils holistically would also support their academic work. He outlined the six aims of pastoral care:

- Enhance learner's experiences
- Support teaching and learning
- Prepare learners for their next steps
- Ensure that learners benefit from onsite counselling services
- Teach learners to show respect for others
- Maintain an orderly environment.

This is very much in line with current educational practice around 'proactive pastoral care'. O'Neill (2021) defines proactive pastoral care as 'the essential element of pastoral structures that focuses on creating, embedding and nurturing a community's wellbeing culture. Proactive pastoral care is preventative in its nature and has many long-term benefits: strengthening community values, promoting character education (formally and informally), and embedding a successful pastoral curriculum just to name a few' (p.2).

McKee (2013) researched child protection updates in the UK nations, USA, Republic of Ireland, Canada and Australia. She notes that the direction of travel globally is to 'consistently place schools, in partnership with others, as a central agent for meeting the holistic needs of children and young people. As well as addressing educational achievement traditionally associated with the work of schools, teachers are now required to consider the safety and physical and psychological well-being of pupils' (p.36). Over a decade later, this could not be truer.

### 2.1 COMPLIANCE: SAFEGUARDING, NATIONAL MINIMUM STANDARDS AND INSPECTIONS

IICSA and the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry highlight a consistent set of recommendations and themes for boarding and residential schools, centred on strengthening safeguarding systems, accountability, and culture.

IICSA found that, historically, some institutions, including boarding schools, failed to protect children due to cultures of deference, poor reporting mechanisms, and a reluctance to challenge authority. Safeguarding was often inconsistent, with inadequate training, weak record keeping, and missed opportunities to act on concerns. As a result, the inquiry reinforced already changing boarding school practice, strengthening a shift towards greater transparency, stronger accountability, and a child-centred approach. Schools are now expected to maintain rigorous safeguarding systems, ensure all staff are trained to recognise and report concerns, and create environments where pupils feel safe to speak up, reflecting a more proactive and preventative safeguarding culture.

Across IICSA findings, key recommendations include the introduction of mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse, improved inspection and regulatory oversight, and a requirement for schools to report allegations and serious incidents to external authorities. There is also a strong emphasis on safer recruitment and vetting, enhanced staff training, and better information-sharing between agencies. In boarding contexts specifically, IICSA highlights the need for clearer guidance on managing peer-on-peer abuse, improved oversight of boarding environments, and stronger regulation of arrangements for international pupils and guardians.

Similarly, the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry identifies systemic failures such as cultures of silence, weak leadership, and lack of effective oversight, leading to abuse going unreported or unchallenged. Its recommendations focus on embedding a child-centred culture, improving governance and supervision in residential settings, and ensuring children have safe, accessible ways to raise concerns. It also calls for reforms to policy, practice, and law to better protect children in care environments, including boarding schools.

Several international inquiries into abuse in boarding and residential school settings reveal broadly similar patterns to those identified in the UK and Scotland. In Ireland, recent investigations into schools run by religious orders uncovered



2.1 thousands of allegations of sexual abuse across hundreds of day and boarding schools, highlighting systemic failures, widespread under-reporting, and a concentration of abuse in residential and special school environments.

In Australia, inquiries into institutional child abuse, including those examining residential and boarding contexts, have similarly found evidence of cover-ups, poor leadership, and inadequate reporting systems, with institutions prioritising reputation over child protection. The Australian Royal Commission (2017) emphasised the need for child-centred cultures, stronger external accountability, and nationally consistent safeguarding standards.

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission into Indigenous residential schools (2015) documented decades of widespread physical and sexual abuse within state- and church-run boarding institutions, underpinned by systemic neglect and isolation from families. The inquiry highlighted how institutional power imbalances, lack of scrutiny, and cultural oppression significantly increased children's vulnerability.

Across these, IICSA and the Scottish Inquiry consistent themes emerged: institutional cultures that discouraged reporting, insufficient supervision and governance, poor record keeping, and a failure to listen to children. The global impact has been a decisive shift towards more rigorous safeguarding frameworks, mandatory reporting expectations, survivor-centred approaches, and greater transparency and accountability in boarding and residential education settings.

In England, central to this increased rigour are statutory frameworks such as the *National Minimum Standards* (NMS) for boarding and *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (KCSiE). These documents set clear, non-negotiable expectations for safeguarding practice. Schools must ensure policies are compliant on paper and actively implemented, regularly reviewed, and understood by all staff. Annual training, safer recruitment procedures, and clear reporting pathways are now standard. Inspections place strong emphasis on how effectively schools interpret and apply these frameworks in daily practice.

Therefore, boarding schools have undergone a significant transformation in their approach to safeguarding and compliance. What was once often guided by tradition and professional discretion has evolved into a highly structured, evidence-driven culture of rigour. Schools are now expected to provide a safe environment

and demonstrate through robust systems, documentation, and accountability, that safeguarding is embedded in every aspect of boarding life. This cultural shift reflects heightened societal expectations, regulatory scrutiny, and a deeper understanding of child protection.

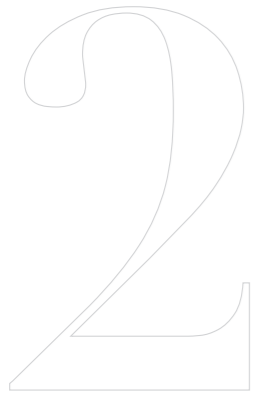
Those who were safeguarding leads in England when the first iteration of KCSiE in 2015 may remember that it was 61 pages long. The draft version for September 2026 currently stands at 201 pages. The increasingly stringent approach to safeguarding is not specific to boarding.

In questionnaires and interviews, most boarding staff mentioned compliance as a key area which has changed during their time in boarding. While the administrative tasks have been noted as contributing to heavy workloads in previous BSA boarding staff surveys, staff also welcome these frameworks. The BSA is aware of many boarding schools internationally using the NMS as a framework for good safeguarding practice.

Record keeping has become significantly more detailed and systematic. Schools are expected to maintain accurate, contemporaneous records of safeguarding concerns, pastoral issues, and behavioural incidents. Digital safeguarding platforms are widely used to ensure secure storage, ease of access for authorised staff, and effective monitoring of patterns or trends. Importantly, the emphasis is not just on recording incidents, but on documenting actions taken, follow-ups, and outcomes, ensuring accountability, transparency and continuity of care.

Risk assessment processes are now integral to boarding provision. Schools are required to assess risks across a wide range of contexts, including boarding houses, trips, activities, and individual pupil needs. These assessments must be dynamic, regularly reviewed and updated in response to changing circumstances. There is also a stronger focus on personalised risk assessments for vulnerable pupils, ensuring appropriate support and safeguards are in place. While there is an acknowledgment that this can be a burden and get in the way of spontaneity and can feel like 'organised fun', most staff note that this is positive and is reassuring for parents and carers.

The recent BBC3 programme, *Boarders*, while entertaining and highlighting some important issues around intersectionality and belonging, paints a poor and very outdated picture of supervision and the daily reality of boarding environments.



- 2.1 These have become more structured. Staff presence is carefully planned to ensure appropriate ratios and visibility including evenings and weekends. House routines such as registration, lights-out procedures, and movement between activities, are designed to minimise risk while maintaining a sense of normality. Technology and sign-in/out systems are increasingly used to track pupil whereabouts, reinforcing accountability and safety.

UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) regulations have added a further layer of compliance for boarding schools hosting international pupils, placing clear responsibilities on them as licenced sponsors. Schools must demonstrate robust systems for monitoring attendance, tracking pupil whereabouts, and maintaining accurate records, as well as ensuring appropriate guardianship and accommodation arrangements during term time and holidays. There is a strong emphasis on safeguarding oversight, including verifying host families, managing travel arrangements, and reporting concerns or changes in pupil status promptly to UKVI. As a result, boarding schools have developed more rigorous administrative and pastoral systems, with closer scrutiny of international boarders' welfare, reinforcing both compliance and safeguarding standards.

This means boarding roles are evolving. The compliance demands can be off-putting for new entrants to the boarding sector. Some Houseparents and Heads of Boarding report they don't always get to take part in the 'fun' aspects of boarding as they are busy with compliance and regulations. Nevertheless, there is an acknowledgement and understanding that these are necessary to ensure children in residential settings are safer and better looked after than they have ever been.

## 2.2 DEVICES

The use of digital devices has introduced new safeguarding challenges, leading to more stringent policies around technology. Schools now implement clear guidelines on device use, internet access, and online behaviour. Monitoring systems, filtering software, and education around digital safety are standard. Boarding staff are expected to understand online risks, including cyberbullying, exploitation, and inappropriate content, and to respond proactively.

There is ongoing debate about phone bans for children across many countries. Data from UNESCO (2026) recorded 114 education systems having a national ban on mobile phones in schools. The implementation of these bans is often delegated to schools as outlined in the *Mobiles Phones in Schools* guidance (2026). Many argue that a more nuanced approach is needed and that young people need to be taught mobile phone and social media etiquette as well as encouraging self-regulation. One interviewee indicated that they invite older boarders to hand in their phones during homework and revision sessions but do not enforce it.

There is often a sliding scale of strictness with devices depending on ages of boarders. While this can create resentment, staff note the positive impact on community and conversations when access to devices is limited. Some boarding settings are indeed stricter than the rules in place at home or with host families. There are many instances where parents allow their children to buy second phones to circumnavigate restrictions or give their child enough pocket money so they can buy another phone or device. They may also allow for unlimited data with no content restrictions. Some staff mentioned that when young people get their devices back, they then "get more intense with time spent on device rather than the desired outcome of achieving more balance". After weekends and holidays, there can be a time of readjusting, but some boarding staff noticed that once boarders are back in 'the swing of boarding, they go back to being "children" and that "boarding provides a healthy alternative to the online environment many are growing up with". This highlights the need for schools, parents and guardians to work together towards a consistent and balanced approach to devices.

Technology and personal devices are now a central part of boarding life, but they are also a frequent source of tension. Many staff described phones as being seen by pupils not just as useful tools, but as a necessity, sometimes even an addiction, which places pressure on boarding teams to enforce strict boundaries. This can be particularly difficult when boarders rely on devices for comfort, entertainment, and contact with home. At the same time, staff noted a clear impact on concentration and academic focus, with devices becoming a major source of distraction during prep and study time. Some also raised concerns about the growing use of AI tools, suggesting that easy access to instant answers may reduce academic resilience and independence, as pupils are less willing to take risks in their learning or work through challenges for themselves.



**2.2** Social media was another recurring theme. Staff recognised its benefits: it helps boarders stay connected to family, maintain friendships across countries, and access useful information, including online tutoring and support for university entrance exams (especially for US applications). However, many also highlighted the emotional cost. Pupils often feel unable to switch off because they are constantly trying to keep up, and social media can create the illusion of connection without the depth of real conversation or healthy boundaries. One consequence, some observed, is that boarders' time can become over-structured, with "every hour timetabled" between school commitments and online academic support. Several staff also commented that many children struggle to entertain themselves without a phone; one interviewee described accompanying a boarder to hospital and watching them become visibly lost once their phone battery died, unsure how to pass the time. Research on the effects of social media is ongoing. Plackett et al (2022)'s longitudinal study on social media and UK teenagers found 'little evidence to suggest that more time spent on social media was associated with later mental health problems.' The recent social media ban for under-16s in Australia is still under evaluation although compliance with the ban seems to be an area of concern as highlighted in research by the Molly Rose Foundation (2026).

Importantly, staff did not describe all phone use as antisocial. Some pupils see being on their phones together as a form of socialising: sharing content, reacting to it, and discussing it as a group. In this sense, devices can support connection and belonging. The challenge for boarding schools is to strike a balance between recognising this reality and maintaining routines that protect wellbeing, community, attention, and relationships. Many staff spoke about setting clear boundaries, such as no phones during meals, activities, or evening wind-down periods, to support community life and improve sleep hygiene. Device confiscation, restricted phone time, and the removal of "tech privileges" are commonly used sanctions, and some staff noted that pupils often negotiate harder to avoid a tech ban than they do to avoid more traditional consequences like detention. In a boarding context, however, these sanctions must be applied carefully, as pupils still need to be able to contact home and parents need reliable ways to reach their children. Alongside boundaries, many staff emphasised the importance of teaching critical thinking and digital self-regulation, so pupils can use technology in ways that support rather than undermine their learning and wellbeing. While some adults see this shift as the "art of conversation dying," others believe communication is simply evolving, and that schools must help young people build the skills to communicate well online and offline.

### 2.3 MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

A central feature of modern safeguarding is the recognition that mental health and wellbeing are crucial elements when working to keep children safe. This is recognised and expanded upon in the 2026 draft of KCSiE. In boarding schools, this has led to a stronger emphasis on pastoral systems, access to counselling, and staff training to identify early signs of distress. Many schools now draw on a wide range of mental health expertise, and wellbeing is promoted through structured programmes and open communication. Several respondents also highlighted initiatives such as the BSA Sleep Champion scheme, which uses scientific evidence to reinforce the importance of sleep as a core component of wellbeing and safeguarding.

This broader understanding reflects a shift from safeguarding as purely physical protection to safeguarding as a holistic responsibility for emotional and psychological health. Evening and weekend activities are increasingly viewed as part of this strategy, helping to balance the academic and social demands placed on boarders. The Department for Education's 2021 guidance, 'Promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges', reinforces this approach by placing wellbeing firmly within schools' responsibilities. While many schools, in the UK and internationally, had already begun this work before formal guidance was published, the document has helped clarify the role of school leaders in creating environments that actively promote positive mental health.

Alongside this, there has been a growing focus on PSHE, emotional literacy, resilience, and empathy. Programmes such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) for staff and pupils, as well as coaching-based approaches to leadership and support, are becoming more common. As Barry (2018) observes, 'We are often unsure as to how we feel... Although emotions rule our lives, we often feel strangely uncomfortable reflecting on or discussing them'. This challenge can be even greater for younger boarders, pupils with communication difficulties, or those for whom English is an additional language, who may not yet have the vocabulary to express how they feel. This underlines the need for schools to teach emotional literacy and self-awareness explicitly, so pupils can communicate distress before it escalates.

Boarding schools are also becoming more aware of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the importance of Adversity and Trauma-Informed Practice (ATIP). Black and Hoeft (2015) explain using biopsychosocial and strengths-based



2.3 approaches can mitigate the long-term impact of ACEs. Frameworks like those developed by Young Minds emphasise the protective role of strong relationships, supportive environments, and clear routines, all areas where boarding schools can be particularly effective. A strong focus on safeguarding, community, and problem-solving can create conditions that protect pupils from adverse outcomes and contribute to recovery where trauma has occurred.

One of boarding's strengths is that mental health difficulties are often spotted early because staff see pupils across the whole day. Changes in appetite, tiredness, social interaction, or mood may become visible more quickly in a boarding environment than in a day school. This holistic visibility can be highly protective, but it also places significant demands on staff, who are expected to remain consistently observant and responsive. In practice, this can mean a high degree of vigilance around mealtimes, sleep patterns, and social dynamics, all of which can be indicators of emerging concern.

Schools are also adapting routines to support wellbeing more intentionally. Some have moved away from Saturday school, opting instead for longer weekdays to create more time at weekends for rest, co-curricular activities, and opportunities to switch off. This reflects a wider recognition that wellbeing depends not only on support services, but on the rhythm and structure of school life itself.

At the heart of all this is the quality of relationships. Positive, respectful relationships are widely seen as essential to both wellbeing and effective safeguarding, and many boarding schools pride themselves on the strength of these connections. In many settings, relationships have shifted from rigid hierarchy towards mutual respect, with more mentoring, listening, and support. Pupils are increasingly given a voice in decision-making where appropriate, and a less authoritarian approach to discipline is often seen as strengthening trust. Increased contact with parents is also mostly viewed positively, helping schools and families work together more closely.

That said, respondents also described tensions. Some felt safeguarding expectations have reduced confidentiality, making some pupils more cautious about sharing concerns, even though the intention is to create a safer environment for everyone. There were differing views on whether relationships in boarding are now deeper or more transactional than in the past. Yet despite these differences, the consistent message was clear: relationships remain paramount.

Trust, communication, and a sense of being known enable pupils to seek help when they need it. Others pointed to staff turnover and the use of duty staff who may see boarding supervision as a shift rather than a relational role, which can weaken continuity. Richard Stokes, CEO of the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) mentions this as a risk in *A Culture of Care* (2021): 'Boarding schools are finding it harder to attract suitable staff who are in it for the long term, and in it for the right reasons. Too many present staff see their boarding duty as a 'shift' which starts and stops and therefore does not solve the issues of really caring for the boarders'. This was also noted as a frustration in some questionnaires where respondents referred to boarding tutors not fully getting involved with the life of the house and therefore not forming strong relationships with boarders.



## 2.4 DISCIPLINE

Approaches to discipline in boarding schools have evolved significantly, reflecting a broader shift towards safeguarding, fairness, and pupil wellbeing. While clear boundaries remain essential, sanctions must be proportionate, consistently applied, and carefully recorded. Greater scrutiny means disciplinary practices must uphold pupil dignity and welfare at all times. Increasingly, schools are moving away from purely punitive models towards restorative approaches that aim to educate, encourage reflection, and promote positive behavioural change. The focus is less on enforcing hierarchy and more on helping pupils understand the impact of their actions and take responsibility for them.

Respondents consistently described discipline today as less “draconian” or authoritarian than in the past. Instead, there is a shared commitment to being “firm but fair,” with an emphasis on guiding behaviour rather than simply punishing it. Many staff value sanctions that include an element of reparation, such as contributing positively to the boarding house, rather than those that are purely punitive. This approach is seen to strengthen relationships and foster a sense of responsibility and community. At the same time, there is a growing emphasis on recognising and rewarding positive behaviour, supported by detailed record keeping and graduated behaviour policies.

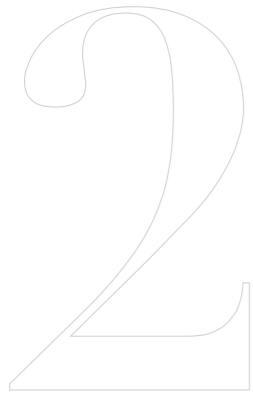
However, this shift has also introduced new challenges. Discipline is now more frequently questioned by both pupils and parents, with some staff noting an increase in parental involvement and, at times, confrontation. As one respondent observed, while most accept a “firm but fair” approach, some parents struggle to accept that their child may be at fault. This can lead to disputes over sanctions, placing additional pressure on staff and sometimes undermining consistency. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL, 2026) similarly notes that ‘a minority of parents with unreasonable expectations and short tempers are a drain on time, energy and resources.’ which can place significant strain on schools. Some respondents also highlighted that pupils may be quicker to deflect responsibility, attributing blame to others rather than reflecting on their own actions, an issue that can impact resilience and interpersonal skills.

These dynamics can affect staff confidence, with some preferring to defer disciplinary decisions to senior colleagues such as Houseparents or Heads of Boarding, particularly where conflict with parents is anticipated. There were concerns that more assertive parents, and by extension their children, may

sometimes secure more favourable outcomes, raising questions about equity. At the same time, the increased need to explain and justify sanctions can make disciplinary processes more time-consuming than in the past.

Within boarding specifically, some staff noted a distinction between school and boarding roles, with boarding environments aiming to feel more like a home than an extension of the classroom. As a result, discipline in boarding is sometimes focused on lower-level issues and relationship management, rather than formal sanctions. Across all contexts, however, consistency, within individual houses and across the wider school, was seen as critical to maintaining trust and fairness.

Overall, developments in discipline are viewed as overwhelmingly positive, aligning more closely with safeguarding principles and the promotion of wellbeing. Nevertheless, restorative approaches require time, training, and commitment, and the increasing involvement of parents and pupils in disciplinary processes can add complexity. Balancing accountability, fairness, and education remains a central challenge and a key opportunity to equip young people with the skills they need for life beyond school.



## 2.5 INCLUSION AND BELONGING IN BOARDING

In line with wider society, boarding has become increasingly diverse. There are a wide range of nationalities, languages, backgrounds, beliefs, needs and identities in boarding schools. And while schools embrace diversity, there must also be a strong focus on inclusion and belonging.

A strong sense of belonging and inclusion in schools can be closely understood through Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), which identifies belonging as a fundamental human requirement, positioned just above basic physiological and safety needs. At school, once pupils feel physically safe and secure, their ability to form meaningful relationships and feel accepted within a community becomes critical to their development. When schools foster inclusive environments, where diversity is valued, pupil voice is heard, and relationships are respectful; pupils are more likely to feel they belong. This, in turn, supports higher levels of confidence, engagement, and motivation, enabling them to progress towards esteem and self-actualisation. Conversely, a lack of belonging can create barriers to learning and wellbeing, reinforcing the importance of inclusive practices as a foundation for both safeguarding and academic success.

Data collected as part of this project as well as BSA's work in schools, shows clear consideration of different cultures. Schools are celebrating festivals and traditions from a range of countries and faiths to ensure their pupils feel represented. Eighty-five per cent of boarders surveyed and interviewed agreed cultural, religious, learning and personal differences are accepted and celebrated in their boarding house. This was also discussed in more detail in staff and boarder interviews.

Culture, race and ethnicity are often used and discussed interchangeably. Race and ethnicity are social constructs which divide populations into smaller groups based on a set of characteristics. Northwestern University describes culture as a 'social system of meaning and custom developed by a group of people [...]. These groups are distinguished by a set of unspoken rules that shape values, beliefs, habits, patterns of thinking, behaviours and styles of communication.' Participants did not mention race or ethnicity specifically in their responses. They also did not mention experiences of racism. This does not mean that racism does not exist in schools. Stringent anti-bullying and behaviour policies would seek to address incidents of racism swiftly and firmly". Boarders mentioned having posters in multiple languages in the boarding house as well as world maps which show pupils' home countries. Accommodating religious practices is crucial in terms of compliance with NMS and the Equality Act 2010 and is a key part of developing belonging for boarders.

One member of staff mentioned that it can mean that trying to please everyone can result in pleasing no one. This was brought into focus in a boarder comment who said they have no issue respecting other people's faiths but that they were "made to go to Chapel and sing hymns despite being an atheist". They felt it did not respect their beliefs. Chapel and religious services, mostly Christian, are often seen as an important tradition and opportunities to bring the whole school together. Chapel is often used to refer to assemblies held in the school Chapel. It is often a time for gathering and reflecting rather than a purely religious opportunity. It is however worth ensuring that the messages shared in Chapel are relevant to all faiths and none. There will also be instances when a pupil might feel uncomfortable attending a Christian gathering or even where their own faith may preclude them from attending.

The increase in the number of children with Special Educational Needs (SEND) in the UK is well-documented. In England, 2025 DfE data suggests that 19.5% of pupils have SEND. This figure has increased every year for the last eight years. In 2025, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland estimates that figure to be 19.4% in its SEN Reform agenda, also noting a significant increase. The ISC started reporting on SEND in its 2010 Census. In 2010, pupils with identified SEND made up 11.1% of all pupils in ISC schools. In the 2025 census, 21.6% of pupils were identified as having an additional learning need. In the latest BSA State Boarding Census, 20% of boarders have additional needs.

Boarding schools present challenges and opportunities for pupils with SEND. The structured nature of boarding, with clear routines, consistent expectations, and predictable environments, can be highly supportive, particularly for pupils who benefit from stability and organisation. But this structure must be applied with flexibility and understanding; without appropriate adjustments, it can become overwhelming rather than supportive. Practical considerations, such as the safe management of controlled medication, can also be complex for staff. It is essential staff are trained appropriately so they can dispense and record controlled medication confidently and safely.

There are also positive social dimensions: living alongside peers can help develop empathy and understanding among the wider boarding community. At the same time, schools must recognise individual differences. For example, one boarder described the need to "recharge [their] social battery," highlighting that pupils with autism, or those who are more introverted, may need time and space away from



2.5 constant social interaction. Supporting SEND pupils in boarding therefore requires a careful balance of structure, flexibility, awareness, and inclusion. The conversation around SEND has become more normalised. Nevertheless, there is still significant stigma attached to learning differences in some cultures. Hirota et al (2024) describe how terminology in some languages contributes to negative attitudes. Autism is used as an example with translations in Korean, Japanese and Mandarin using the words ‘disorder’, ‘withdrawal in self’ or ‘unsociable/solitary disorder’. These negative connotations can make conversations with some international parents more challenging.

There is acknowledgement that boarding communities are now more accepting of LGBTQ+ people in terms of staff and pupils. One respondent notes that “the attacks worldwide and at home on the rights of this community and the reversing of legal protections have made some people in my boarding community very anxious and disheartened”. In addition, some of the countries boarders come from hold very different views about LGBTQ+ matters. In this case, it is even more important boarding schools continue to be a place where these children can feel a sense of acceptance. It is not without its challenges even in the most accepting boarding communities. The operational adjustments linked to accommodating gender-questioning boarders as well as how best to manage same-sex relationships are two issues which schools must grapple with.

The New South Wales government (2019) describes cultural safety as ‘more than just being aware of other cultures and respecting all people. It is about creating a workplace where everyone can examine our own cultural identities and attitudes and be open-minded and flexible in our attitudes towards people from cultures other than our own’. Cultural safety in boarding schools is reflected in thoughtful practices such as inclusive representation in marketing materials, sensitivity to dietary requirements, and flexibility around technology use to accommodate different time zones. Celebrations and events contribute to cultural safety and are opportunities to educate the wider community and raise awareness, and to foster a sense of pride, identity, and belonging among boarders. Central to this is the role of pupil voice: pupils are best placed to express which traditions and practices are meaningful to them and whether they feel genuinely represented in school initiatives. Importantly, this requires an individualised approach, recognising that cultural identity is personal and nuanced, and should not be addressed solely at a broad group level.

Boarding schools can provide respite for children experiencing difficult or unstable home circumstances, offering a safe, supportive, and consistent environment in which they can thrive. This was the starting point for the ‘Boarding Chances for Children’ project initiated by the DfE in England in 2014 as a precursor to the 2017 ‘Boarding Schools Partnership’ programme. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) ‘Report on Lessons Learned’ (2017) states that ‘boarding schools were seen as being able to offer [Children in Need/Child Protection Plan] stability (lifestyle, accommodation), to build character, develop resilience, provide routine, apply a structure, present discipline, supply nutrition, offer recreational activities, and support aspirations’. The report also highlights that boarding needs to be for the ‘right child’ in the ‘right circumstances’ which we will explore in section 5.

The Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation uses boarding for young people on the ‘edge of care’ or where home life may be fragile or unsustainable, helping to provide stability while maintaining links with family where possible. SpringBoarders benefit from structured routines, high-quality pastoral care, and access to educational and co-curricular opportunities that may not be available otherwise. Research and impact reports from the Foundation and the University of Nottingham highlight ‘life-transforming outcomes’, including improved emotional wellbeing, increased self-confidence, and stronger academic progress. For some children, particularly those who have experienced disruption or trauma, boarding offers education and a protective environment where consistent adult support and early intervention can help them rebuild stability and realise their potential.

The Boarding Chances for Children project was partly based on the success of the French ‘Boarding Schools of Excellence’ programme. Grellet (2023), examining the French system, highlights the benefits of boarding for underprivileged pupils, particularly in narrowing attainment gaps by providing consistent support and access to educational resources. A boarding environment can play a significant role in supporting academic outcomes by creating an atmosphere intentionally structured around learning. With dedicated prep times, supervised study, and reduced day-to-day distractions, boarding schools provide conditions that are conducive to sustained academic focus and productive habits. This is complemented by immediate access to academic support, peer collaboration, and a culture that often values effort and engagement. Similarly, Gonzalez Canche et al. (2025), in their study of ‘left behind’ pupils in China, found boarding provision can



- 2.5 positively influence academic attainment by offering stability and structured learning environments.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (1989), describes how different aspects of a person's identity (such as race, gender, disability, sexuality, and class) intersect to shape their experiences in ways that cannot be understood by looking at each identity in isolation. Applying an intersectional lens when supporting pupils is crucial because they may face overlapping forms of marginalisation that compound one another. Crenshaw's work reminds us that without recognising these intersecting identities, support systems risk overlooking the specific barriers some pupils face. An intersectional approach enables educators to provide more nuanced, equitable, and affirming support that reflects the full complexity of each pupil's lived experience.

Boarding is not immune from some of the issues observed globally. One respondent talked about beginning to see "backlash" towards some of the inclusion initiatives their school organises as well as an "assumption" that young people are more accepting of difference which can sometimes be wrong. Another mentioned that the multicultural aspect of boarding "is not always appreciated by British parents". For example, one respondent working in Prep boarding said, "boys generally have carried on being pretty mean to those that are different". This highlights the need to continue educating and showing respect for differences. While there is an element of ticking boxes for inspection and compliance, as one interviewee noted "inclusion isn't a checklist, it is a way of being".

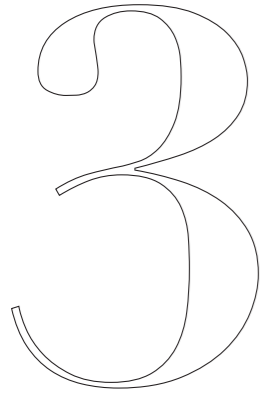
Reflecting on Marland's vision of pastoral care, modern boarding fulfils the six aims and provides the holistic care he envisioned.



*Boarders have generally become more accepting of diversity over the years, influenced by inclusive school policies, increased cultural awareness and exposure to peers from different backgrounds. There is still much to be done as the media often show the opposite of tolerance and respect for difference.*

**(Interview #9)**





## Boarding staff\*

### 3.1 HOW BOARDING HAS CHANGED

There is greater demand for flexible options and fewer full boarders overall. The impact can be felt at the weekend in particular when mostly international boarders are there. This can make community and integration more challenging, especially as many of the trips and activities which foster house spirit take place at the weekend.

The current economic climate and the imposition of VAT on independent school fees in the UK contribute to uncertainty about boarding for staff. For some it used to be an obvious career path into senior leadership, but this is no longer guaranteed. Boarding numbers decreasing has also led to restructuring and redundancies. Boarding staff numbers have been reduced in some schools to help manage staffing costs and some feel anxious, for example when they are on duty on their own in case of an emergency (interview #2). Additionally, the increasing levels of needs of children in terms of SEND and mental health can place greater emotional load for staff. Without sufficient training and support, this can affect wellbeing, home life and also attention to other boarders. As schools are paying ever more attention to their budgets, some staff are asked to take on more responsibilities across day and boarding school. Some staff also reported that to accommodate international families, exeat had been removed and there was more pressure to keep boarding houses open during some holidays which did not allow staff to rest fully. As compliance requirements increase, staff spend more time on administrative tasks. For some, this perfect storm might lead to unbearable stress. Staff turnover can lead to less continuity for boarders but also being able to recruit 'good' boarding staff with appropriate skill set rather than someone who sees the perks of accommodation. Recruitment and retention were noted as prominent issues in the BSATIOB Boarding Staff Survey (2024).

Facilities have improved. Those in boarding for more than 15 years noted there is now greater awareness of the need for privacy and for boarding houses to feel homely. Design is no longer an afterthought but part of a strategy around wellbeing, for example optimising sleep conditions. Some newer boarding houses resemble modern university halls of residence. There is increasing demand for single en-suite rooms which some feel is not compatible with the essence of growing up in a boarding house.

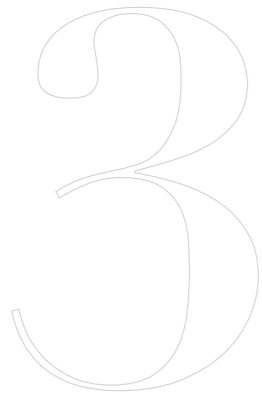
Some guardians have become more "business-like" as opposed to pastoral figures. It can be challenging to get support from them in crisis situations. This may be linked to tighter UKVI regulations.

Parents are seen to be more demanding and more involved than they previously were with some noting the Covid years as a turning point. The previously held stereotypes about 'shipping your child to boarding school' and not caring for a term/year are no longer current in most cases. Schools make deliberate efforts to keep frequent communication going with parents, transcending distance and language barriers.

Induction programmes have become more structured to ensure a smooth transition into boarding life. Participants mentioned having more information ahead of boarders arriving and the care taken to make sure new joiners feel welcome immediately. This cannot prevent homesickness entirely but helps alleviate the adjustment to being away from home in a new environment. One interviewee (#14) explained how they have 'welcome back' packs and cards after each holiday away from the boarding house as that can be experienced as a new transition every time.

Some respondents noted the move to a more horizontal model of boarding with junior/senior houses is also part of their safeguarding practice to minimise concerns about potentially unsafe interactions between older and younger boarders. Thinking back to section 2.3 and 2.4, this also marks a move away from older pupils being feared and handing out sanctions to younger boarders.

\*Please note that any words in speech marks are a direct quote from a member of staff.



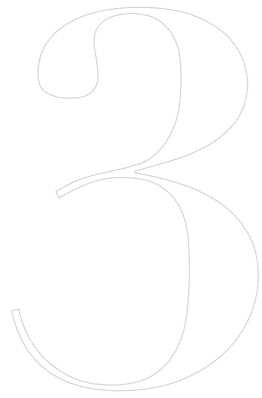
### 3.2 WHAT HAS BEEN LOST

*"If I could implement one new initiative, it would be to formally reintroduce a culture in boarding that encourages healthy risk-taking, unstructured play, and learning through real-world experience. It would be supported by a policy that essentially says: 'It's okay to get dirty. It's okay to fall. It's okay to make mistakes, and it's okay to not have everything perfectly controlled'. In recent years, we've unintentionally created environments that overprotect teenagers in the name of safety, liability, and structure. Safeguarding is absolutely essential, so too is the need for teenagers to develop emotional resilience, physical courage, and the ability to manage risk. These things cannot be taught only in theory, they must be lived and felt. Children used to climb trees, build forts, fall over and learn to get back up. These weren't just pastimes; they were life lessons. Today, we sometimes treat bumps and bruises as failures of care, when in reality, they are often moments of growth. When we eliminate all challenge and discomfort, we also eliminate opportunities for problem-solving, grit, and independence. Boarding schools are uniquely placed to help young people learn how to navigate the world. But to do that well, we need to stop wrapping them in metaphorical bubble wrap. We need to let them take the lead sometimes, even if that means muddy shoes, bruised shins, or plans that don't work out. Because those are the moments when real learning happens. This initiative wouldn't mean recklessness or carelessness. It would mean creating intentional, well-managed opportunities for students to test themselves, explore safely, and reflect on the experience. Whether that's through outdoor adventures, real-world responsibilities, or just more time for free play, it's about raising teenagers who are confident, capable, and ready for life beyond school. If we never let them experience risk, how can we expect them to cope when they're on their own?"*  
(respondent #51)

The respondent's reflection is a powerful reminder of how risk, play, and real-world experience are not luxuries in adolescent development but essential ingredients for resilience and independence. It highlights a tension many schools face: safeguarding must remain non-negotiable, yet overprotection can inadvertently deprive young people of the very challenges that help them grow. By calling for intentional, well-managed opportunities for healthy risk-taking, they position boarding schools as uniquely capable of restoring a sense of adventure, autonomy, and authentic learning that some young people may currently miss.

Most staff who worked in boarding for more than 15 years said they did not miss any traditions. As one suggested: "If a tradition was lost, it is often because it became outdated, inappropriate or irrelevant in a rapidly changing world". Another said "Generally, a lot of the old traditions are best left where they stand". Some talked about letter writing and time to do nothing and switch off as this has been replaced by devices. One respondent mourned the loss of family feel, partly due to tighter NMS regulations about access to private accommodation and previous activities like gathering in a TV room.

In other responses, staff described a sense of loss around the communal, relational, and character-building aspects of school life. They highlighted fewer meaningful leadership opportunities in the Sixth Form, a decline in shared meals and the family feel of in-house dining, and a diminished sense of full-boarding community, particularly where some day staff are perceived as less engaged. They also miss unstructured downtime, such as informal chats or spontaneous activities, which has been squeezed by pressure to deliver "value for money" through full academic and co-curricular schedules. Others noted the loss of evening reflection time, reduced engagement with the local community, and fewer chances to develop traditional life skills. Overall, many felt that academic demands have increasingly displaced the communal experiences that once shaped a strong sense of belonging.



### 3.3 A CHANGING BOARDING COMMUNITY

Boarding schools today operate within a rapidly changing social context, shaped by global uncertainty, shifting expectations, and evolving pupil needs. Many respondents highlighted how young people are increasingly aware of “big-world issues,” including geopolitical instability and the climate crisis, alongside a growing consciousness of family finances and the high cost of school fees. These wider pressures sit alongside rising levels of mental health needs and special educational needs, sometimes compounded by stigma in certain international communities as explored in section 2.5. As a result, boarding staff are taking on increasingly complex roles, with one interviewee describing them as “front-line mental-health responders,” reflecting the level of expertise and responsiveness now required to support pupils who may struggle to process emotions and change.

At the same time, academic and societal pressures have intensified. As outlined in the 2026 White Paper ‘Every Child Achieving and Thriving’ in reference to the Good Childhood Report (2025), ‘the UK is last in how happy 15-year-olds are with their life’ prompting the need for reform. As one member of staff noted, “today’s boarders often experience immense pressure to perform, with grades viewed as the primary measure of success. This narrow focus can overshadow the broader goal of education, which should be to foster personal growth, curiosity, and resilience. In some cases, students become defined by their results rather than by who they are or who they are becoming.” This pressure is often accompanied by a desire for immediate success, with some pupils “wanting success to be instant” and struggling with setbacks. One respondent observed that “as we take more responsibility for the structure of their academic work, we lower the instances of failure but also create a culture of dependence,” raising concerns about resilience and independence.

Expectations around pupil voice have also evolved. Pupils are increasingly involved in decision-making about aspects of boarding life such as food, activities, and events. While this is widely seen as positive, some more experienced staff noted a growing sense of entitlement among a minority of pupils. This could be linked to the experiences described in 2.4 where some parents are becoming more defensive and questioning school and staff’s decisions. Conversely, the emphasis on pupil and child-centred practice is very much in line with policy and guidance.

Children feeling psychologically safe are more likely to feel empowered to ask questions and challenge decisions.

As outlined in 2.5, boarding communities themselves are becoming more diverse, supported by bursaries and scholarships as well as increasingly international intakes. This brings clear benefits but also requires high levels of cultural competence and intentional community-building. While boarding offers valuable opportunities for developing interpersonal skills and learning to live alongside those from different backgrounds, some respondents noted that integration can take time, with certain groups tending to stay together. Others highlighted that the impact of social media may have “weakened the art of casual conversation,” while post-pandemic shifts mean some pupils find shared living spaces more challenging with one respondent noting that some are “unable to share spaces” but “once they have moved into a single room, they are absolutely fine.”

The balance between independence and support is another key area of tension. Increased regulation, while strengthening safeguarding, can sometimes reduce opportunities for independence if not carefully managed. Some staff expressed concern that a more “hotel-style” experience driven in part by parental expectations. This can limit opportunities for pupils to develop life skills such as cooking or laundry. Others pointed to structural approaches such as vertical boarding as a way to scaffold independence over time, with older pupils modelling behaviours and younger pupils gradually building confidence. However, independence is not always straightforward; one respondent noted that “some boarders want very little adult input, they believe they can do it all themselves which is challenging to navigate when that is not the case.” In some instances, increased privacy, such as single rooms with study facilities, can also blur the line between independence and isolation, reducing natural opportunities for interaction or seeking help. As one member of staff reflected, this shift may mirror “a more individualistic society,” which does not always align with the communal ethos of boarding.

Finally, several respondents observed that pupils are sometimes arriving at senior school less prepared for the demands of boarding life than in previous years. They “need more guidance and structure and it is taking them longer to settle,” with

## 3

- 3.3 some finding it difficult to manage their time, emotions, and routines without frequent reminders. This may reflect broader developmental trends, including challenges with self-regulation and executive functioning, as well as the increasing complexity of pupil needs. There is a growing body of research about the lasting impact of the Covid pandemic on child and adolescent development. Rao and Fisher (2021) describe the impact of uncertainty on brain development as well as the loss of learning and socialisation at a crucial time in their development. For babies born during the pandemic, Eisen et al (2025) found these children are 'at increased risk of delayed milestone achievements in all four domains (gross motor, fine motor, social-emotional and language) compared with infants who were born before the pandemic'. This is something educational settings may have to take into consideration and adapt to in future years.

## 4

## Current experiences of boarders\*

Most boarders said they board because their parents live abroad or far away. This was principally because of military service overseas, other jobs outside the UK or international pupils. Some international boarders said they were in the UK to improve their English and because the British education system appealed to them and their families. This was linked to better teaching, a wider range of subjects and better pastoral care. Some were thinking ahead to UK universities and maximising their chances of entry.

Boarders recognised the following benefits of being in boarding:

75%  
SAID THAT THEY HAD  
GAINED INDEPENDENCE

73%  
THE ABILITY TO  
MAKE FRIENDS

55%  
LIFE  
SKILLS

41%  
FEEL THEY ARE MORE  
OPEN-MINDED AS A RESULT  
OF BEING IN BOARDING

They also mentioned the below:

- No commute
- Increased resilience and empathy
- Tolerance and being able to communicate and get on with people you wouldn't normally talk to
- Better ability to focus on academics and academic support available outside of main school hours. Boarders mentioned they are more motivated to work hard when they see peers studying around them and therefore feel supported
- Increased self-discipline
- Leadership skills and life skills
- Learning about different cultures and people
- Always having people around to talk to
- Social skills such as conflict resolution, compromise and teamwork. One boarder said "You have to try and solve it or learn to live with it" when referring to friendship issues. Another noted "You can't avoid the problem, so you have to deal with it". Research from TABS (2024) highlights that boarders 'credit their schools with helping them develop essential interpersonal skills like conflict resolution, empathy and open-mindedness' (p.6).
- The strength of the boarding community and celebrating each other
- Having routine and structure
- Support available from older boarders who have gone through same issues or can help with studies.



75.5%

OF GERMAN PARENTS

FELT THEIR CHILDREN HAD BECOME MORE INDEPENDENT AND MATURE AS A RESULT OF THEIR EXPERIENCE IN BOARDING.

74%

OF SPANISH PARENTS

95%

OF BOARDERS SURVEYED REPORTED FEELING SAFE IN THEIR BOARDING HOUSE

In 2025, BSA and BAISIS surveyed German and Spanish parents whose children attend or have attended a British boarding school. 77.5% of German parents and 74% of Spanish parents felt their children had become more independent and mature as a result of their experience in boarding.

On the whole, boarders feel they are treated fairly. Older boarders understand that not everyone can be treated the same due to additional needs or circumstances. The five per cent who responded “no” did not elaborate in the available comment field.

87% said they always or often feel connected to their boarding community. Friendships, support from staff and shared experiences were the key factors in establishing connections ahead of activities and traditions.

Some boarders also mentioned that boarding life can take some time to adjust to, especially if you are an only child, normally have your own room or come from a completely different culture. Most boarders recognised schools work hard to ensure boarders settle in and feel at home as soon as possible. They mentioned welcome packs, special meals at the return to boarding, as well as mentor and buddy schemes

**Below are the most frequent answers to questions about what boarders reported struggling with or wanting to improve:**

- Lack of privacy
- Language barrier, especially after first arrival
- Not being able to go back to the boarding house during the day
- House sanctions for one person's actions
- Food (portions, variety, blandness and supper being too early)
- Strict phone regulations
- Curfews at weekends
- Having more activities as a whole house
- Being away from family especially when there is a time difference.

**Boarders were also asked about what they enjoy most in boarding:**

- Boarding feels like “a second family”
- The depth of friendships
- Feeling part of the community
- Kindness and acceptance
- Support from house staff
- Support from Medical/Health teams
- Mutual respect with house staff; in interviews, boarders mentioned that this is also based on trust which can easily be lost
- Playing board games
- Boarding trips and activities.

What they report enjoying are not necessarily the big traditions but rather the small things such as water fights, a particular quiz night, having a boarding house iftar during Ramadan, the first time they played rugby, a houseparent supporting them after they received bad news from home or their home country's national day being acknowledged.

95% of boarders surveyed reported feeling safe in their boarding house. They mostly (90%) feel comfortable asking staff for support and feel that boarding staff care though some said that it would depend on the member of staff. One boarder said, “staff don't treat it as a one-time problem, they keep checking in”, another added that staff “really try to understand what is going on when you feel down”.

Boarders also recognised the amount of support available in other areas of the school such as posters signposting helplines, access to the Wellbeing Hub, counsellors, independent listener, the health centre, peer mentors etc as well as the focus on wellbeing activities such as the pool, or journaling.

*It has become like a home to me. I have made lifelong friends, and we are a close community*

**(Interview #12)**

## 5

## When boarding might not be the right fit

While modern boarding is a far cry from the experiences referred to in 'Boarding School Syndrome' and other similar accounts, some children may still find it difficult to adapt to and thrive in a boarding environment. Aside from personal preference, there are several factors which need to be considered when deciding if boarding school is suitable for a young person.

Sieff (2015) outlines how neglect of insufficient care in early years can have a negative impact on brain development. She highlights emotional regulation as a key area and consequently the difficulty in feeling stable and secure. This is reinforced by O'Neill (2021) suggesting that sound school pastoral structures benefit children who have experienced emotional trauma. Barrett (2006) describes: 'For some children who have been rejected, abused, humiliated or treated in ways that have left them feeling confused about what to expect from other people...such children will not be able to use their attachment figures as a secure base and will be more likely to be pessimistic both about the chances of people liking them and about the way people will treat them.' Adult-age outcomes were researched by Hopkins (2021) who explored the impact of boarding from a young age and found higher incidences of anxiety at adult age. Wharton and Marcano-Oliver (2021) also make the link with higher rates of substance abuse. That said, some respondents highlighted that boarding at a younger age can, for certain children, lead to positive outcomes, reducing the stress of long commutes and helping pupils become "more organised and self-sufficient" while "appreciating their families more." However, as one respondent noted, this is highly dependent on context: "they need the right staff in place to support them and the younger they start, the better the end result." Ultimately, boarding can be highly beneficial, especially when there is a good match between the child's needs, their readiness, and the school's capacity to support them effectively.

Modern boarding may indeed provide safe attachment figures with consistent, well-trained staff. Nevertheless, it cannot replace those early experiences of parenting which is an additional consideration for some prep age boarders. Not all children suffer ACEs. However, for young children who have experienced early trauma, some may not have had sufficient time with secure caregivers to begin recovering from what they experienced in early childhood.

For some, the fundamental difficulty lies in being away from parents or family for extended periods. This may stem from family circumstances, separation anxiety, attachment difficulties, or insufficient preparation and induction. In some cases, issues such as 'affluent neglect' can further complicate a child's sense of security and belonging. Where boarding is chosen primarily due to family tradition or parental lifestyle, rather than the child's own readiness or preference, it may be harder. Pupils who feel they have been sent away rather than supported may struggle to form trusting relationships with staff and peers, and deeper issues around attachment or trauma may only become apparent once they arrive, making the settling-in process more complex and requiring significant expertise and support.

There are also practical and systemic challenges. Schools must balance inclusion with finite resources, and while reasonable adjustments can be made, there are staffing and budget limits. This can make it difficult to meet the needs of all pupils, particularly where they may not completely align with the practical reality of boarding provision. Some pupils arrive without having visited the school, sometimes leading to a mismatch between expectations and experience, while others may expect a level of individualised support that boarding staff cannot realistically provide. As a result, tensions can arise between admissions promises and day-to-day practice.

## 5

Readiness for boarding varies widely. While boarding can foster independence and maturity, some children may not be developmentally ready for the level of structure, emotional regulation, and social skills required for communal living. Conversely, some accustomed to high levels of freedom may find boarding routines restrictive, leading to frustration, defiance, or disciplinary issues. Others may present as highly independent but still require significant emotional support. There can also be misconceptions about boarding itself, with some pupils approaching it as a “sleepover” or “hotel with staff”, rather than a structured educational environment with expectations and responsibilities.

Mental health needs present an additional consideration. While boarding schools increasingly provide strong pastoral care, there are cases where a child’s needs exceed what can reasonably be supported in that setting, for example, where very close supervision is required or where behaviours such as running away place the pupil outside the school’s care and control. In such situations, alternative provision may be more appropriate.

Cavenagh and McPherson (2024) make the case for the concept of ‘boarding family syndrome’ rather than ‘boarding school syndrome’ as they propose that factors such as ‘family context, home environment and parenting seem to be particularly dominant across several of the studies, leading us to question whether boarding school is the primary cause of adult distress’. This perspective can also be read as reinforcing the value of a high-quality boarding education. If adverse outcomes are more closely linked to pre-existing familial factors, then positive boarding environments may in fact serve as protective or stabilising influences rather than sources of harm. Their argument invites a more balanced interpretation: rather than positioning boarding schools as inherently detrimental, it suggests that the quality of pastoral care, community belonging, and structured support within boarding settings may mitigate challenges that originate outside the school and offer consistency, opportunity, and emotional safety for many pupils.

## 6

## Conclusion

### 6.1 THE UNKNOWN

As noted in the introduction, many of the accounts about abuse in boarding are historic. Although current guidance and legislation aim to make schools and by extension boarding provisions as safe as possible for young people, there is no zero risk. We cannot predict whether young people in boarding now will speak positively of their experiences in 10, 20 or even 30 years.

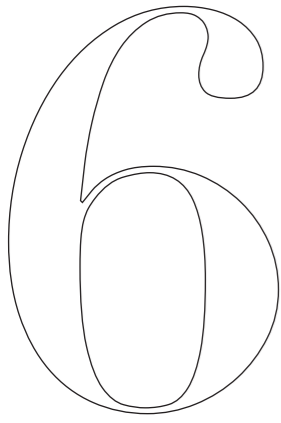
It also remains to be seen how future UK governments will handle VAT for independent schools. VAT has made boarding fees unaffordable for some families. General cost of living has also had a significant impact on fees overall. Though boarding numbers are holding strong in the state sector, fees have also risen in line with increasing operational costs.

### 6.2 ACHIEVING THE PERFECT BALANCE

Taking into account the views of staff and boarders as well as the current climate and thinking about boarding, there remain a number of questions for senior leaders to consider:

#### The boarding community

- How can the boarding sector remain agile by offering flexi- and weekly boarding options while still preserving a strong sense of community?
- How can boarding environments foster a genuine sense of belonging for all pupils?
- How can boarding schools preserve the enjoyment and social richness of living with peers, ensuring space for fun and connection? As one interviewee noted, “we are running the risk of boarding becoming more functional than familial. Bringing back pockets of unscripted, human connection could go a long way in rebuilding the warmth and relational depth that makes boarding life truly special.”



- 6.2
- How can schools maintain a clear identity and set of values in an increasingly competitive and complex landscape?
  - How can schools effectively balance academic and co-curricular demands with sufficient downtime for pupils and boarders?
  - How can schools balance the demand for high-quality, competitive facilities with the communal nature of boarding, particularly in relation to expectations for single rooms?
  - What is the right balance between access to phones and devices, and how can schools promote digital literacy, healthy boundaries, and appropriate restrictions?
  - How can boarding schools ensure pupils develop essential life skills alongside academic achievement?
  - How can increasing demands for record keeping and compliance be managed without detracting from time spent with pupils?
  - What is the appropriate level of parental involvement, and how can schools manage expectations while maintaining professional boundaries?

#### Financial concerns

- How can schools remain competitive by offering an outstanding boarding experience (trips, facilities, pastoral care, and food) within tighter financial constraints?
- How can rising operational costs be managed without compromising the quality of the boarding experience? What are the implications of budget constraints on creativity and innovation, and how can schools avoid merely 'surviving' rather than thriving?
- How can schools generate additional revenue (e.g. through lettings) without undermining boarders' access to promised facilities such as pools, gyms, or courts?
- How can schools continue to demonstrate value for money in the face of rising costs?

#### Boarding staff

- How can schools recruit and retain specialised, highly skilled boarding staff, particularly non-teaching roles that require expertise but come with significant cost?
- How can boarding staff be supported to move beyond supervisory roles, ensuring they are well-trained while also maintaining a healthy work-life balance?
- How can schools invest in meaningful professional development across the whole team to ensure there are no weak links in times of crisis, particularly in areas such as pastoral care and mental health?
- How can boarding schools sustain a sense of vocation among staff while mitigating the risk of burnout?

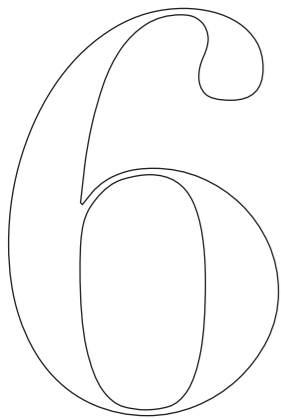
When children board for the right reasons and are surrounded by the right staff who have benefited from the right training, boarding is a positive experience and can be transformational.



*At its heart, boarding should always remain what it is meant to be: a home. A safe, secure, friendly, and caring community where young people can grow. That foundation must never change. To meet the needs of future generations, boarding schools must continue to prioritise creating a simple, joyful, and nurturing environment.*

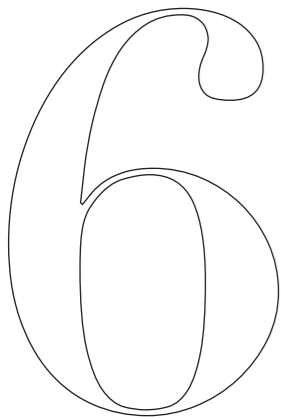
(Interview #4)





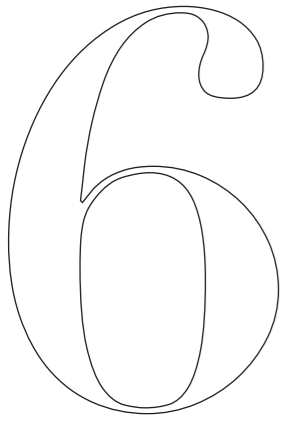
**APPENDIX A – A SELECTION OF RESPONSES FROM QUESTION 18: DESCRIBE A MOMENT THAT MADE YOU FEEL PROUD OF THE BOARDING COMMUNITY. EVERY COMMENT IS A DIRECT QUOTE.**

- “During cultural celebrations where pupils who may not typically socialise with our East Asian pupils actually joined in and learned about their culture and traditions”.
- “Safari supper - the whole house came together in individual houses but also as a whole boarding community. Showing off their culinary skills from their international homes. Also, our end of year House parties - seeing the girls all come together and celebrate the year, their friendships and achievements is wonderful!”
- “Watching how the boys support each other and their respect for their house. Seeing them behave with respect and kindness towards all staff not just their teachers.”
- “Whenever the students do something that you know they couldn't have achieved if they weren't a boarder.”
- “Difficult to single one out - it is the caring and supportive culture.”
- “We held a ‘Residents Lunch’ and the boarders organised the menu, drinks, seating arrangements, entertainment and jobs e.g. servers/sommelier. This brought the whole community together”.
- “A Year 12 student arrived from China halfway through this academic year with ambitions of gaining entry to a conservatoire, yet she has never performed in front of anyone except her singing teacher. Last week, she sang in front of the Head of Music, Head of Sixth Form and myself, and last night she sang in a school recital - her first proper performance. Making some good friends in the house and seeing them ‘have a go’ at things gave her the understanding that she needed to try to be brave, and it turns out that she really enjoyed the experience.”
- “Just this week, when an experienced Year 8 scooped up a younger, new, homesick international child without being asked, and helped them unpack and settle in. Made me realise what a thoughtful young person we'd been parenting.”
- “When one boarder shows care and kindness to another boarder”.
- “Being from a background where boarding schools are seen as being incredibly posh/inaccessible to many, getting to tell people I am now a houseparent has been amazing. I've had the opportunity to change the narrative around boarding, particularly with the stereotypes of people who work there. I've been able to show that boarding staff can be any age, and to repeatedly demonstrate how seriously mental health is taken. I've been able to talk much more about the diversity of students in boarding, and the backgrounds they come from, which has been much wider than people perceived. There's still a long way to go to changing the way my community (former mining village) views boarding, whether in the state or private section.”
- “Starting at a school where the boarding was seen as an ‘extra’ and very small to it being a main focus of the school.”
- “During the pandemic, we offered “quarantine” for international students. Quite a lot of schools persevered and adapted to meet the needs of international students.”
- “Building a relationship with the boarders who board all week.”
- “Every time alumni come back to the schools I've worked in and say, ‘I can't believe how relaxed everyone looks, how freely they talk, what you talk about...It's like a proper home now’.”
- “Seeing people on LinkedIn building in-person networking events for boarding staff. I have had nothing to do with this but I'm happy this is happening because it needs to for the wellbeing of staff and students across the country. I hope this only further expands to include more people.”
- “Any whole boarding event - roller discos/ discos/ inflatables etc...”
- “During open morning events, when boarders are able to sell the house to prospective parents and students. They take pride in their environment.”
- “When the older boarders have seen a younger boarder upset and homesick and have sat with them and chatted about how they used to feel.”



- “We are considered one of the most charitable houses in our school and our community rallies well when we have an event that everyone participates in, I am proud of how our pupils embrace the challenges that are inclusive to all in house. We run events and have teams across the years in house, and it makes me happy to see year groups integrate.”
- “Seeing how proud our boarders are of their environment and how well they take care of it.”
- “I always feel proud of the community as a whole when we are inspected - I know we offer a great product and in every inspection we have had for the last 25 years that has shone through in the conversations boarders and staff have with inspectors.”
- “One moment that stands out was Boarding Staff Appreciation Day, when students took the lead in organising messages, performances, and gifts to thank the people who care for them daily. It reflected a deep cultural shift, from seeing staff as authority figures to valuing them as mentors and role models. The authenticity of the gratitude and the maturity with which students expressed it made it a proud moment for everyone involved. Another was our Chinese New Year Evening. Students from all backgrounds came together to plan, decorate, perform, and host a truly inclusive celebration. It showcased not only creativity and collaboration but also how far our community has come in embracing cultural diversity with genuine enthusiasm and respect. Both events showed how boarding has evolved into a space where empathy, agency, and cultural awareness are not only present but thriving.”
- “When we developed ‘coming home to care’, providing wrap around care and support for our youngest students. I think that level of parenting has paid dividends in well-being, behaviour and staff engagement.”
- “Some boarders don’t want to leave boarding. One said ‘I’ll always remember my time in boarding, you made such a difference to my life’ Sometimes we don’t realise how much what we do matters to some boarders.”
- “Whenever I see students attending events that they don’t really choose to do, but still they do with willingness.”

- “I have built a house up from a bad place. I now have a house that is happy, knows the boundaries, gets involved and are proud of their community and relationships. It has taken years of determination. But also during Covid, our boarding community was resilient and made the most of a bad situation with whatever lockdowns they faced and distances from families. There is nothing to it but to evolve and adapt, and schools and boarding do that very well!”
- “Boarders’ recent social: hearing laughter and seeing boarders enjoying a meal together with staff being part of the conversation.”
- “We ran a little art exhibition for my 5-year-old son and there were 30 odd students from the boys’ and girls’ side who all came together to draw and chill out with children - it shows a certain level of kindness and community mindedness.”
- “See pupils all the way from year 9 though school and watching them go off and start their new journey.”
- “Karaoke event - the first three singer were terrible, but they loved it, and so did the audience....it was amazing!”
- “One of the proudest moments for me wasn’t during a grand event or major achievement, but in a quiet, everyday act: when I witnessed a boarder hold the door open for another and say, ‘thank you’. That small gesture captured everything we work so hard to build, a community grounded in respect, care, and kindness. It’s moments like this that reflect how far we’ve come. When such values are lived naturally by boarders, not because they’re told to, but because it’s simply ‘who we are’ it tells me that the culture of the boarding house is thriving. These small actions create ripples: they set the tone, influence others, and form the foundation of a strong, compassionate community. It’s in these everyday behaviours that the true evolution of a boarding community can be seen, when kindness becomes instinct, and mutual respect becomes our norm. That’s when I know we’re doing something truly special.”
- “At the end of each year, we celebrate together achievements, events as a community and one large family environment.”
- “Fund raising to help others.”
- “Girls supporting each other through Ramadan.”
- “The acceptance and support of others make me proud daily.”

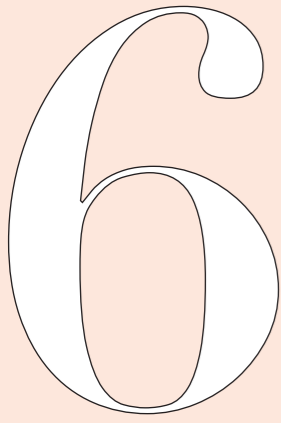


- “Seeing the students grow. One student was very argumentative and angry, accusing staff etc... She was held back a year and has had to repeat a few of her exams. She has been nurtured by the staff (and her own family) to be a confident, positive member of the community. There will be tears when she leaves at the end of this year. She even left me a note on my desk this morning to let me know how she was getting on.”
- “The whole school performance, utterly mesmerising.”
- “When boarders are planning and enjoying activities. When staff have been proactive and taking the initiative to create and participate in all areas.”
- “When they asked to have a sporting event live streamed at the end of our founders day so that they could support the members of school competing. They were not their ‘friends’ but as they were part of their house, they wanted them to be there for them.”
- “Embracing students who socially transition.”
- “This year, in a new role and school I have seen the power of boarding students feeling listened to and support when they had not previously done so. This has led to significant buy in and an extremely rewarding year.”

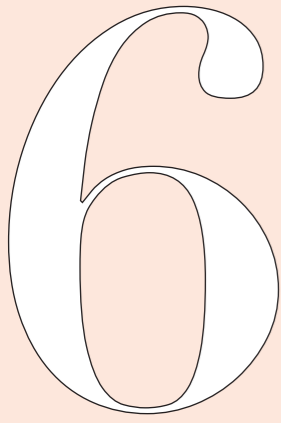


## APPENDIX B – BIBLIOGRAPHY

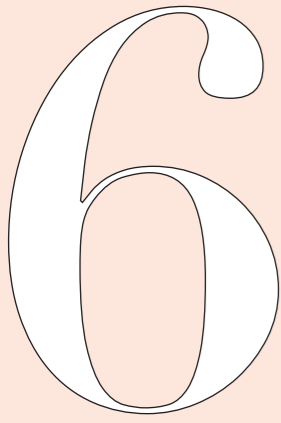
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