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# Being a boarder

## A Survey of Boarders' and Parents' Views on Boarding Schools

Dr Roger Morgan OBE,  
*Children's Rights Director*

[www.rights4me.org.uk](http://www.rights4me.org.uk)

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# The Children's Rights Director

My statutory functions as Children's Rights Director for England are set out in the Children's Rights Director Regulations 2004. Under these Regulations, I work as part of the Commission for Social Care Inspection, as the Commission's 'children's auditor'. I monitor the work of the Commission in safeguarding and promoting the rights and welfare of children. With my team in the Office of the Children's Rights Director, I directly ask children and their parents for their views about welfare and welfare services, report their views, and give advice to the Commission and to government in line with their views.

I have these legal functions for

- children living away from home in boarding and residential schools and further education colleges, and in children's homes, residential family centres, foster care and adoptive families;
- all children being supported by council social services;
- care leavers.

I report children's and parents' views to the Commission, which then publishes them and sends them to the appropriate government ministers to be taken into account in making relevant policies. The Commission also takes the reported views of children and parents into account in its work of inspecting and reporting on the services concerned.

Reports of children's views (including the top ten messages from children and young people on each consultation topic) are published on the Commission's children's website [www.rights4me.org.uk](http://www.rights4me.org.uk)



For boarding schools, my responsibilities are concerned with the welfare of boarders, rather than with their education. The Commission for Social Care Inspection has the task of carrying out three-yearly inspections of welfare in each boarding school in England. These assess welfare against National Minimum Standards issued by the government after joint development with the boarding schools sector itself. The Standards set out how every boarding school should safeguard and promote the welfare of its boarders in order to meet the welfare duty placed on boarding schools by the Children Act 1989.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Roger Myles'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'R'.



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# Summary

Boarding schools come out very well from this survey of the views of parents and boarders. Overall both the boarders and the parents who responded to our survey rated boarding schools as looking after children well. Neither group identified any single major changes that need to be made.

Boarding schools are seen as offering a positive social life, with plenty of friends and activities, often across cultures, and with strong benefits of learning social skills and independence. On the more negative side, there are issues of separation from home and family, the continuing need to counter bullying and homesickness, and the desire for privacy in communal living.

The public caricature of boarding is of a negative environment of high physical bullying, poor care and extreme homesickness. These do not come through as major issues for today's boarders or their parents – and boarders themselves register fewer concerns about separation from family and homesickness than their parents.

The key issues for boarders and their parents nowadays are about

- balancing rules and independence at school;
- building further on consultation and taking views of both parents and boarders into account;
- spreading knowledge about and increasing the responsiveness of complaints procedures;
- maintaining activities for weekend boarders with the increase of weekly and flexi boarding and local community use of school facilities.

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Many professional adults are concerned when, as Children's Rights Director, I ask children what they think their rights and responsibilities are. However, they should be able to agree with the views of boarders on both scores in this survey. The main rights boarders put forward coincide with those already set out in the National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools (see also page 19), which were developed with the boarding schools sector and issued by the government. In terms of rights, both boarders and their parents focused on privacy. The main responsibilities defined by boarders were respect for others, caring for oneself, and respecting rules and school property.

The two big messages from boarders and their parents resulting from this survey are that boarding does not suit everyone, and that it is vital that the right choice of school is made for the individual child. For the child suited to boarding, in the boarding school that suits them and that responds to the needs of those who may not easily fit in, boarding is reported to be a positive experience.

The final word goes to a parent who summed this message up for many:

***“Different children suit different schools – some are happy boarding, some prefer day schools. Some children have to go to boarding school, but may not want to. Boarding schools must understand the needs of those children. Personally, I think they are great, ours takes great care of our son.”***



# Introduction

This survey was conducted during 2003 by the Office of the Children's Rights Director to find out the views of both boarders and their parents about the positive and negative aspects of boarding life; about any major changes they thought were taking place in boarding provision; and about specific issues I, as Children's Rights Director, am required by the Children's Rights Director Regulations to consider.

These issues include: how far children are consulted about their care at school; how far their views are taken into account; and access to complaints procedures for both pupils and parents.

This report presents and comments on the data from the returned survey questionnaires, and includes direct (but non-identifiable) quotations from both pupils and parents to illustrate the findings.

I am grateful to the Heads, staff, boarders and parents of each of the schools who took part in the survey; to the Boarding Schools Association for its support in carrying out this study; and to David MacDonald, then working in the Office of the Children's Rights Director, who read the questionnaires and analysed the results. The provision of a number of photographs in this report by the Boarding Schools Association is gratefully acknowledged.

## Survey method

Survey questionnaires asking for views about boarding were sent to boarders and to their parents. These were designed to secure the original views of the pupils and parents completing them, rather than responses to statements we had provided. Staff of the Office of the Children's Rights Director analysed the opinions expressed to identify and categorise the most common views.

To ensure that we had a reasonably representative sample, we picked every tenth boarding school in the list of schools provided to us by the Department for Education and Skills. If the selected schools agreed to participate, we asked them to give questionnaires to the four oldest and the four youngest boarders in each of their boarding houses. These boarders were asked to complete and return their questionnaires direct to the Office of the Children's Rights Director; prepaid envelopes were supplied to ensure confidentiality. We also asked the schools to send parents' questionnaires to the parents of each of the boarders involved. Those too were returned direct to our office.

If a school we chose was being inspected by the Commission at about the same time as the survey, we chose the next school on the list instead so as to avoid placing too many burdens on the school and its pupils.

By this process we invited 61 boarding schools to take part in the survey. Thirty-six agreed to do so. These schools included both independent and local authority maintained schools. All but four of the independent schools taking part were accredited by the Independent Schools Council.

The participating schools had 114 boarding houses between them. We eventually sent out questionnaires to 916 boarders in these schools and 932 parents (discounting those who dropped out of the process at the early stages).

The percentages quoted in this report are of the total number who returned the questionnaire concerned. The figures we report are either for all boarders or for all parents. We concentrate on reporting the common themes across all boarders and all parents who replied to us. We did not attempt a more detailed breakdown by gender (of boarders or of parents), or by age of boarders, or between schools. Too detailed a breakdown could have reduced confidence in our findings, especially since many different views were held by just one or two people, and many different views were expressed from within the same individual schools.

## Survey respondents

The survey results set out in this report are drawn from the 527 completed questionnaires we received. Many more boarders than parents returned their questionnaires: 385 (42%) of the boarders and 142 (15.2%) of the parents.

Fewer than a quarter (34, 24%) of the parent questionnaires we received were from parents of full boarders (i.e. pupils who stay at school for the whole of each term, apart from occasional short breaks at home). Three quarters were from parents of weekly or flexi boarders, who either stay at school just during the working week or who share time living at home or school on a flexible basis.

The findings of the survey are based on a very wide age range and also a very wide experience of boarding. The youngest boarders to return completed questionnaires were aged eight, the oldest 21; 15% were under 13. The median age of the boarders who returned questionnaires was 14. We heard from more 14-year-olds than from any other age; a fifth of the returned questionnaires came from them. A high proportion (21%) of the boarders who responded were adults – most (62, 16%) of these were aged 18. This underlines the high upper age of the oldest boarders in many boarding houses. The proportion of adult boarders responding to our survey

is higher than the actual proportion of all boarders aged 18 or over, which the boarding schools sector estimates to be 13%.

We received questionnaires from parents of boarders aged 8 to 19. The median age of their children was 14, with a fifth of the parents having boarding children of this age. As might be expected, we heard from a slightly higher proportion of parents of younger boarders, i.e. aged under 13, than from those younger boarders themselves (25% of parent questionnaires were about boarding for children under 13), and from fewer parents of adult boarders than from those adults themselves (10% of parent responses were about their adult boarders).

**Roger Morgan**

29 October 2004



# 1 The Best and Worst of Boarding

## Key points

### The best

- Parents and boarders agree that living with friends is the best thing about boarding.
- Out of class activities are important to both groups.
- Parents also emphasise continuity of education.

### The worst

- Parents and boarders agree that being away from family and friends is the worst thing about boarding. But more parents than boarders stress this.
- Boarders are more concerned about the practicalities of daily life – restricted freedom, strict rules and food – than their parents.
- Bullying is not a major concern.

## What's best?

We asked both boarders and their parents to tell us what they thought were the **two best things about living at boarding school**. The answers varied widely. The list below shows the things a significant number of respondents identified. Very many more issues were identified by only one or a very few respondents each, and are not listed below.

The best things boarders listed were:

- living with your friends (28%);
- making new friends (9%);
- out of class activities (6%);
- having independence (6%).

These were the four things listed by more than 5% of boarders; the percentage of boarders listing each one appears in brackets.

The best things listed by more than 5% of parents were:

- living with friends (16%);
- out of class activities (12%);
- learning more independence or confidence (11%);
- learning to live with other people (10%);
- having independence (9%);
- continuity of schooling (7%);
- getting school work done (6%).

Clearly the best thing about boarding is **living with your friends**. Both boarders and their parents thought this, though more boarders rated it best than their parents. For boarders, making new friends was the second most frequent best thing, which emphasises the importance of the social living side of boarding.

Parents and boarders saw living in the boarding community in slightly different ways, although both referred to the **benefits of community living** as a best thing about boarding. Parents were more likely than boarders to give **learning to live with other people** as a best thing; only 2% of boarders listed this as such. Boarders were more likely to see this in terms of **making new friends** (which was listed as such by only 4% of their parents). Community spirit was specifically listed as a best thing by just under 5% of boarders, but by only 2% of parents.

*“There is a positive, friendly atmosphere as long as you are involved in activities you are going to enjoy. As well as being with your own friendship group as they are your main support network.”*

Some boarders stressed the importance of meeting people and making friends from other countries and cultures, and of the contribution the international side of boarding makes to those coming to this country to study: *“Students from foreign culture get to know new culture without too big cultural shock because there are still other international students. Getting contacts with people all over the world.”* Parents often made similar points: *“where our child would develop into a ‘world citizen’”; “teaches them to get on with others and help others*

*– particularly those from other countries with different cultures”.* One parent said that their child had *“made lifelong friends around the country and globe”.*

Although boarding staff did not feature in the most frequently mentioned best things about boarding, many boarders did make comments on their questionnaires. Many comments were positive: *“I would just like to thank our housemistress”; “a good housemaster is essential in maintaining this delicate balance. My housemaster achieves this perfectly.”* Some comments were negative: *“there are some teachers that are aggressive in their language”; “teachers can be petty”.*

Comments on the questionnaires showed that for boarders **being with friends is more than just having fun**. Friends share activities with you, are part of the atmosphere of where you live, share highs and lows. You fall out with them and make up again, and they are your source of support as well.

One boarder summarised this in their statement of what was best about boarding for them: *“There is a positive, friendly atmosphere as long as you are involved in activities you are going to enjoy. As well as being with your own friendship group as they are your main support network.”* Another said: *“The thing I like about boarding is that you have loads of people with you and even if you have an argument at the end of the day you all end up being friends.”*

Friendships could develop over time: *“Being with my friends is great and you can become closer when you’re with them longer.”* This of course did not work for everyone all the time. Another boarder said: *“I enjoy it a lot with friends, but if you fall out with someone it can be hell.”*

Many parents wrote about the **greater opportunities to be with other children** at school, particularly for children without other children at or near home. Examples of such comments were: *“as an only child with older parents – to be able to mix with peers and not*

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*always be the only child*"; *as a single parent we believed he would benefit from living in a community*"; *we live in the country with no other children nearby. The company of other children was very important*"; *would be lonely 'home alone' when we were working.*"

Boarders' comments showed that friendships do not just happen because you are a boarder – you have to work on them if you live in the same place, but gain in doing so: *"It makes you a much stronger person if you are capable of keeping friendships even though you have to spend all your time together."* Very young boarders commented positively on always having friends around at school: *"There is always someone to play with."*

Both parents and boarders named **independence** as a positive benefit of boarding, but again looked at it from slightly different angles. Nine per cent of parents and 6% of boarders said that living as a boarder itself gives you some independence. However, parents were more likely to see this as specifically teaching you to become more

independent still – 11% of parents listed learning more independence as a best thing, compared with just under 5% of boarders.

However, many boarders commented that boarding **develops your independence**

for the next step of your education. One typical comment was: *"It is a very good way to prepare for life at university, in that you have to look after yourself and your things."* Another, about to leave, said: *"Boarding has certainly made me more responsible and I think*

*boarding for sixth form is a great step between home and uni."* Boarding provided a balance – being independent but within a clear framework: *"You grow up so quickly and you are independent but still have rules."*

Some boarders thought that learning independence reached its limits at the top of the school. You could feel that you had

*"Boarding has certainly made me more responsible and I think boarding for sixth form is a great step between home and uni."*

outgrown the school and were being limited by being with younger children: *“good for growing up – not so good when you’re older”*.

Parents commented on the **positive benefits of boarding for individual children**. One wrote of a child who had boarded because of problems at home and in day schools, and who was *“now of*

*sufficiently independent character to be a day pupil, both holding his own against more domineering people and confident in his own abilities”*.

Another wrote in detail about the benefits of specialist boarding for a dyslexic child.

Some boarders and parents commented positively on how independence at school away from the family **changed**

**parent/child relationships**. One boarder described this by saying: *“It is nice to get away from your parents for a while, making it more special when you see them again”*. On the same lines, a parent commented: *“Children emerge more independent and capable of independent living. Also appreciate family life more.”* Another parent wrote: *“In a funny way, it has resulted in stronger relationships within the family. The time they are home is precious and utilised well.”*

Out of class **activities** available to boarders at school came a close runner-up to friendships as a best thing about boarding for both parents and boarders. Although both groups listed these as a best thing, twice as many parents did so as boarders. Some boarders commented positively on the activity side of boarding – among them the boarder who told us *“There are many more opportunities to get involved than in day schools, and there is rarely a dull moment.”*

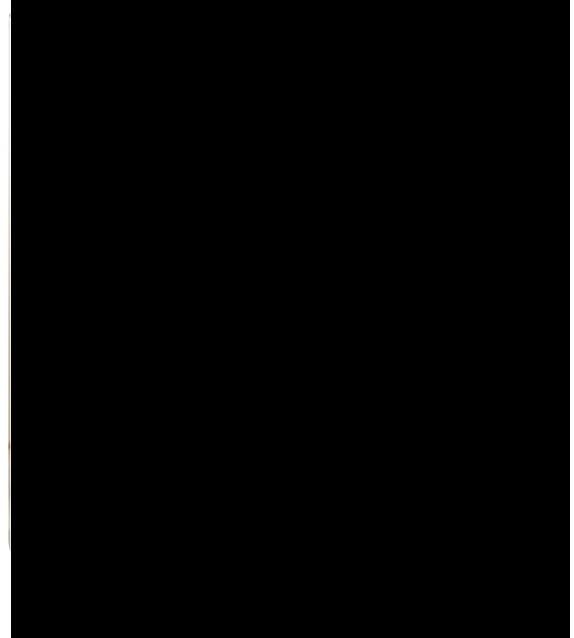
**Getting school work done** was listed by 6% of parents. This also featured as a best thing for 4% of boarders, who thought it easier to get work done as a boarder than as a day pupil. One boarder said: *“You’re not distracted by TV or phone, so it is easier doing prep here.”*

In one area there was little agreement between parents and boarders. This was the benefit of boarding as a way of ensuring **continuity of education** at the same school while parents moved or travelled. This was listed by 7% of parents, but by none at all of the boarders. One parent described the *“continuity between academic and welfare and development of child”*; another summarised boarding as providing *“the best education possible in a very nomadic lifestyle”*.

Of the best things listed by less than 5% of parents or boarders, it is worth mentioning that some boarders and parents thought that one of the best things about boarding was **not having to travel** long distances to and from school each day. As one parent put it, *“avoids school runs”*. This was listed by just under 5% of boarders and by 4% of parents.

*“In a funny way, [boarding] has resulted in stronger relationships within the family.”*

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## What's worst?

As well as asking what boarders and parents thought was best about boarding, we wanted to know what each thought were the two worst things about living at a boarding school. Again, the answers varied widely. The lists below show the things a significant number of respondents identified. Very many more issues were identified by only one or a very few respondents each, and are not listed below.

The worst things boarders listed were:

- being away from family and friends (12%);
- restricted freedom (11%);
- food (11%);
- homesickness (8%);
- strict rules (6%);
- lack of personal space (5%).

These were the six worst things listed by more than 5% of boarders; the percentage of boarders listing each appears in brackets.

The worst things listed by more than 5% of the parents were:

- being away from family and friends (23%);
- homesickness (18%);
- food (6%).

There are striking differences between what boarders and parents thought. For both groups **being away from your family and friends** was the most negative thing about boarding. Both groups also named **homesickness**, which represents the extreme of this, as one of the worst things about being a boarder.

However, boarders listed these things far less often than their parents did. Only one in eight boarders said that being away from your family and friends was one of the worst things about being a boarder, while nearly a quarter of the parents listed this. Eight per cent (about one in twelve) of boarders reported homesickness as a worst thing about boarding for them, compared with 18 per cent (more

than one in six) of parents. Homesickness is certainly a serious problem for some people, but both this and simply missing your family and your home-based friends were less likely to be identified by boarders. A typical comment by a boarder was *"Boarders have a lot of freedom and boarding can be fun, but a lot of people miss home"*.

Sometimes these views were linked to whether you went home at weekends or stayed at school while weekly or flexi boarders went home.

One typical comment was: *"When the weekend is over and people who have gone home come back with their parents and you didn't go home that weekend, you tend to feel a little homesick."*

Boarders were more concerned than their parents at some of the **practicalities of living with others** in boarding accommodation. One in nine identified the restrictions on personal freedoms arising from community living as a worst feature of boarding. Smaller numbers listed more specific **limitations on personal space** and the **rules** that had to be kept.

There were many thoughtful comments about the question of keeping to rules. Some people just didn't like some of the rules their schools had. Others wrote about the balance of rules and freedoms when everyone was living together and learning how to be independent. One person described the effects of rules on behaviour: *"We make mistakes and we learn,*

*"Boarders have a lot of freedom and boarding can be fun, but a lot of people miss home."*

*"The bigger dorms should be split up so you can get more privacy."*

*but if we are controlled so much, it makes us want to do things we're not supposed to even more.*" Others were concerned that rules should be the same throughout the school: *"I think that all boarding houses in the same school should have the same rules."*

Although it was not in the 'top' worst features of boarding, 4% of both parents and boarders mentioned **lack of privacy**. Privacy sometimes means being able to get away from others when you need to, as well as issues such as having sufficient space (specifically identified by 5% of boarders). *"The bigger dorms should be split up so you can get more privacy and if you're getting older you get into more arguments and so you can go and hide if you're upset."* Some parents also identified issues of physical accommodation: *"too many children in bunk beds, cramped in one room"*.

Small numbers of both parents and boarders listed **food** as a worst thing – perhaps not surprisingly more boarders (one in nine) than parents (one in 17) mentioned this.

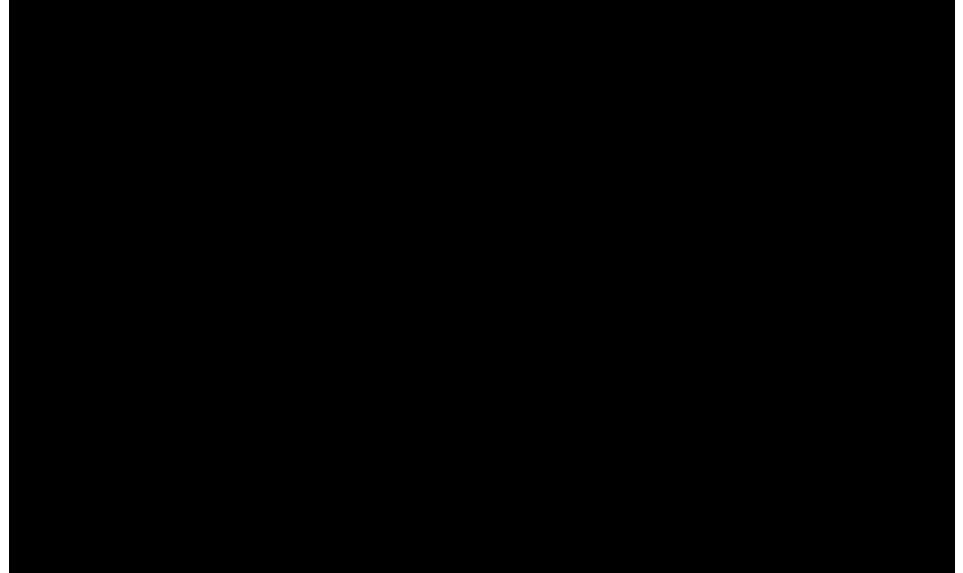
It is very encouraging that in responding to our open question inviting them to identify the worst things about living at boarding school,

neither boarders nor parents listed **bullying** as a common concern arising from being a boarder rather than a day pupil.

Those who did comment on bullying were usually clear that it was verbal rather than physical. *"It is verbal abuse that is degrading and wears on people"; "boarding school bullying is a lot less physical."* One parent summarised the importance of effective prevention, as well as testifying to the effective response to the problem at their son's school: *"My son was bullied while boarding. The school dealt with this swiftly and efficiently."* Another confirmed the view that bullying, including verbal bullying or teasing, is a *"persistent problem"* always needing to be dealt with.

A small number of boarders commented on concerns about bullying being different in a boarding environment than in a day school: *"not as easy to escape from, as pupils are constantly enclosed in the school's environment"*.

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## 2 Changes in Boarding

### Key points

- No major changes are currently happening in boarding.
- Weekend and flexi boarding are increasing – but those who do not return home at weekends can find themselves at a loose end.
- No major change is identified as necessary. Suggestions from boarders include improved facilities and more freedom.

### Changes now

We asked boarders and parents what they thought were the two biggest changes happening in boarding schools at the time of our survey.

Their answers suggest that major changes were not happening in most schools. Nearly one third of the boarders (31%) and just over a quarter of the parents (26%) reported no current changes, and no single change emerged as especially important.

Some boarders commented that they thought **boarding had improved over recent years**. This was summarised in one pupil's assessment: *"Boarding schools have generally improved, in my opinion, over the years. There is now much more equality and respect for people's privacy and feelings and more of a community feeling."* Some parents said that boarding had changed significantly and positively since their own childhood. For example: *"Boarding life has, for better,*

*changed immeasurably since I was there 35 years ago"; "boarding schools have changed substantially in the past 30 years."*

The change most often reported by parents was an **increase in flexible or weekly boarding**. This was mentioned by 10% of parents. One positive comment about this development was: *"They have been weekly boarders and have had the best of both worlds, home and school."*

However, boarders themselves did not see this as a key change – only 1% mentioned it. Some boarders did comment on the risk that increased flexi boarding could leave a minority staying at school over weekends with less to do than when most boarders stayed.

One boarder gave us the following analysis of this issue, asking that the trend to flexi

*"There is now much more equality and respect for people's privacy and feelings and more of a community feeling."*

boarding should be resisted but also offering an alternative solution: *“In a school where pupils are allowed to leave on weekends, there is a minority left in school due to parents being unable to pick them up. This causes boredom, which may turn a child lost for things to do, to smoking and drinking etc. Boredom could be lessened by having more facilities open during the weekend, and many staff in school to marshal the activities of pupils.”* Others appreciated the balance of a week at school with weekends at home: *“Most of the time it is very good fun, however, it is nice to have weekends at home.”*

Some boarders commented on another aspect of the new flexibilities in boarding: **weekend**

**use by the public of school facilities** which might reduce their availability for the few boarders staying at school. One boarder wrote: *“We would like to use the facilities of the school whenever, within reason, we like. However, the school is required by the government (so I’m informed) to let out its facilities to the local people. Far too often, we have been left with nothing to do on*

*weekends or in the evenings, because our sports hall, swimming pool etc is already being used by local people.”*

Some parents also commented on the issue of activities for boarders at school at weekends when others returned home: *“Schools which mix day and boarding education should ensure that there is adequate weekend provision for boarders as otherwise they will be looking with some envy at their peers who are at home have a ‘wonderful’ time at weekends.”* Another parent wrote that *“Trends*

*towards weekly boarding make weekends lonely for those obliged to stay as parents abroad.”*

The changes reported by more than 5% of boarders were **new or improved boarding facilities**, and **new furniture or decoration** in boarding accommodation (both reported by 7% of boarders). Just under 5% of the parents also identified new or improved boarding facilities at their children’s schools.

## What needs to change?

As well as asking parents and boarders to report any current changes in boarding schools, we asked both groups to propose two things they thought should be changed.

This question produced a variety of responses, and neither boarders nor parents came up with a single generally agreed change. Boarders were more likely to propose changes than their parents. Over a quarter of boarders (27%) and just under half the parents (46%) said that no changes were needed at all.

No single change was proposed by more than 5% of parents. Three changes were proposed by more than 5% of boarders. None of these was surprising – each was linked to important issues already identified by a minority of boarders in response to other questions.

One in ten boarders proposed **improvements in boarding facilities** or the **furniture or decor** of boarding accommodation. Boarders identified improvements that had already taken place as a positive change. Some thought improvements would bring various benefits: for instance, *“improved dorms because if they are new, girls will respect them. It’s just when they are old they will treat them badly.”*

*“Schools which mix day and boarding education should ensure that there is adequate weekend provision for boarders.”*

Nine per cent of boarders (one in eleven) proposed **more freedoms** for themselves while boarding, almost the same proportion that identified restrictions on freedoms as a worst thing about boarding. One in twelve proposed improvements in **school food** (again, similar to the proportion who saw school food as a worst thing about boarding). Comments on food highlighted variations in satisfaction not only between individuals and schools but also between individual dishes – “*sometimes the*

*food is good, sometimes bad.*” Four per cent of parents agreed that school food should be improved; this was the most frequent improvement proposed by parents.

Six per cent of boarders proposed **less strict rules** at school – the same proportion that nominated rules as their worst thing about boarding.

*“Sometimes the food is good, sometimes bad.”*

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# 3 Boarders' Rights and Responsibilities

## Key points

### Rights

- Parents and boarders identify privacy as the most important right.
- Boarders also think that freedom and freedom of speech are important.
- Parents also highlight the following rights: to keep in contact with the outside world; to health and safety; and to be listened to.

### Responsibilities

- Boarders and parents agree that respecting others is the most important responsibility.
- Other significant responsibilities are caring for oneself; respecting the school rules; and getting on with others.

## Rights

One of my statutory duties (as Children's Rights Director) is to report on any significant matters related to the rights of children using provision such as boarding schools. We therefore wanted to discover what boarders themselves, and separately their parents, thought were **boarders' two most important rights** at boarding school.

The results were clear, encouraging and reasonable. The rights boarders nominated most frequently were in line with those that adults would expect and regard as significant in a residential setting. They were also issues

already covered in the National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools, and in no way conflicted with accepted good boarding practice.

**Privacy** was the right most often listed by both boarders (15%) and parents (11%). This was linked to the more specific issue of **personal space**, which was nominated by 6% of boarders; this is similar to the proportion who had identified lack of personal space as a worst aspect of boarding.

Only two other rights were nominated by 5% or more of the boarders. One was **freedom** (identified by just under 6%) – another of the issues already identified as important to boarders. The other was **freedom of speech** (just under 6% of boarders).

Parents nominated four further rights in more than 5% of their responses, although these were not identified by as many of their boarding children.

- One in ten parents listed the **right to keep in contact with the outside world** (nominated by just under 4% of boarders). This issue is covered in the National Minimum Standards.
- Parents were more aware than the boarders of the **right to safety and protection**. Seven per cent of parents nominated this as a right, but only 1% of boarders. Again, this right appears in the National Minimum Standards, which set out detailed practice for keeping children safe from harm, assessing risks, and checking staff and other adults.
- More parents than boarders nominated **being listened to** as a right for boarders: 7% of parents but only 3% of boarders. (This right also appears in the Standards.)
- The final nomination by over 5% of either group was the **right to be shown respect**. It is interesting that this was more often nominated by parents (5%) than by boarders (only 1%).

It is worth noting that while the **right not to be bullied** did appear among the answers to this question on boarders' rights, it was not perceived as a major issue, and was listed by more parents (4%) than boarders (2%).

## Responsibilities

Alongside rights go responsibilities. We asked both parents and boarders to nominate what they thought were the **two most important responsibilities of pupils** in boarding schools. Again the results were clear and reasonable, with a great deal of agreement between boarders and parents:

- Boarders and parents agreed that **respect for others** was the most important responsibility of boarders. Seventeen per cent of boarders and 31% of parents nominated this as the main responsibility, and it was the responsibility most frequently nominated by each group.
- Both parents and boarders nominated **caring for oneself** as a major responsibility for boarders. Again this was proposed by more parents (11%) than boarders (7%).
- Both groups also listed the responsibility to **respect the school's rules**. Ten per cent of boarders thought respecting the rules was one of their most important responsibilities, compared with 6% of parents.
- Boarders and parents agreed on the responsibility for a boarder to **get on with others** at school: 6% of each group nominated this as one of a boarder's most important responsibilities.

One of the remaining responsibilities nominated by over 5% of either group revealed a significant difference between parents and boarders. Eight per cent of boarders were very practical in saying that **looking after the school buildings and property** was one of their most important responsibilities. Only 2% of parents nominated this.

Just over 5% of parents mentioned **working hard** as a responsibility; almost as many boarders – 4% – also nominated this.



## 4 Why Board?

### Key points

- Continuity of education and the high quality of education in boarding schools are the main reasons parents give for choosing boarding.
- Parents also stress that choosing the right school for the child is important, and emphasise that children need help settling in.

We asked parents to tell us the most important factor that had led them (and their child) to choose a boarding education.

The four most frequent reasons, all given by more than 5% of parents, were:

- continuity of education (16%);
- high quality of education offered (14%);
- necessity because of parents working in the armed forces (6%);
- poor local schools (6%).

Three per cent of parents specifically stated that boarding was their **child's choice**, rather than theirs.

Some parents wrote strongly that in their experience boarding is the **best overall sort of education**: *"Boarding ethos should be available to all as a right, not just available to a means tested elite"; "having my children go through the boarding system, I have been totally happy, as have my boys."*

The issue of boarding because of concerns at the **quality of local state schools** was summarised by one parent who wrote to us:

*"The facilities available, both academically and for recreation, are far superior to anything offered at day schools in this area. It gives my child the choice and chance to sample so many things that would not normally be made available to him."*

Many parents wrote to us stressing that the **choice of the right school for boarding is critical**: *"It has taken us 10 public school visits to find one that I would entrust the care of child to the housemistress concerned."* On similar lines, many parents also stressed that boarding suits some

*"[Boarding] gives my child the choice and chance to sample so many things that would not normally be made available to him."*

children but not others:

*“It works extremely well for certain children in certain schools.”*

Some parents wrote about risks of boarding, but said that their particular school had been right for their own child:

**“Boarding life is not for all children.** *Some are very homesick and are not respected for this. As parents we feel that the children are not given the same attention as we would give them. In general, my children have enjoyed their boarding life, this is mainly due to the school itself.”*

Some parents wrote strongly about the need to **help children settle in** and to be positive in responding when a child did not eventually ‘fit

in’ to a particular school. One parent wrote that *“New boarders need extra care to cater for the social wrench of leaving home, family and friends, and to learn the art of communal living – early/initial terms need ‘close nurturing’.”* Another, who stated that they themselves taught at a boarding school, suggested that parents needed to watch out for the tendency that *“if the child isn’t fitting in they do not usually question their system, it is easier to blame the child.”*

One parent wrote positively about the school they had eventually selected: *“It is vitally important that boarders have their own freedom to be their own unique selves – I believe that this is encouraged and valued in the school my son attends. I do NOT believe that this is the case with most boarding schools.”* Parents needed to invest well in finding the right school for their particular child in the first place and to ensure that the child was then able to fit in to that school in practice.

*“New boarders need extra care to cater for the social wrench of leaving home family and friends, and to learn the art of communal living.”*

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# 5 Schools Listening

## Key points

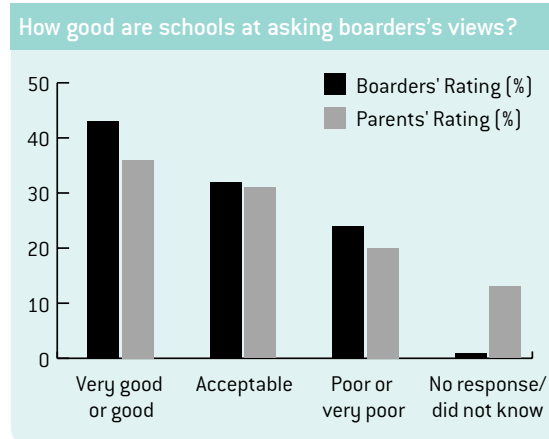
- Broadly speaking, boarders and parents are satisfied with the way schools ask what boarders think about how schools operate.
- Fewer parents and boarders think that boarders' views influence the school. However, boarders believe that their views should be taken into account more.
- Parents are almost equally divided about whether schools are good at asking for parents' views. But more parents think that their views make a difference than boarders think that boarders' views make a difference.

## Listening to boarders

One of the National Minimum Standards requires boarding schools to consult their boarders and to take their views into account. I am statutorily required to report on how well services, including schools, consult children and young people. In this survey, we asked boarders and their parents for information on this topic.

Each boarder and each parent was asked to rate how good boarding schools are at asking boarders for their **views about the way the school works**. The ratings offered were: very good, good, acceptable, poor, very poor. The chart opposite summarises the responses.

Overall, just under a quarter of boarders (24%) thought that boarding schools were less than 'acceptable' in how well they asked pupils for their views. Over four out of ten (43%) commended boarding schools for asking for



their views as pupils, giving a good or very good rating. Boarders tended to give more extreme ratings (either positive or negative) than their parents. It is interesting that one in eight (13%) parents said that they did not know how well schools asked for pupils' views; only 1% of the boarders said that they did not know.

Boarders said more about this in their comments. Typical positive comments were: “I think that [my school] is a caring community where people will listen to what you have got to say”; “the housemistress is approachable, willing to consider your suggestions.” Typical negative responses were: “If I am unhappy

*about something or want to complain, they don't listen to me”; “when I was once hurt, the school secretary told me to go away.”*

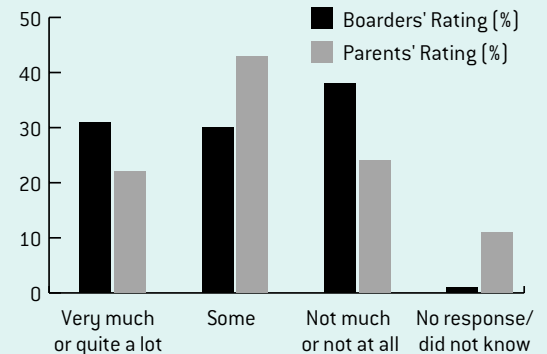
*“When I was once hurt, the school secretary told me to go away.”*

Some boarders were clear that **schools differed**, and wrote about both good and not so good experiences at different schools: “My current school is much more understanding and takes views into consideration, however my previous school didn't, so it really depends on which school you're at.” Much can depend on the staff member in charge of your boarding house.

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How much do boarders' views make a difference to the school?



Asking for views is only half the story. Taking pupils' views into account is also important, though not of course the same thing as necessarily agreeing with them. We asked boarders and parents how much they thought boarders' views actually make a difference to how boarding schools work. The ratings offered this time were: very much, quite a lot, some, not much, and not at all. The results are given in the chart above.

The approval ratings in response to this question were somewhat lower than for the question about listening to boarders' views. Still, nearly a third of boarders (31%) thought their views made a lot of difference to how boarding schools worked. This opinion was more positive than the parents', just under a quarter (23%) of whom thought their children's views made a lot of difference. Again, the boarders tended to be either more positive or more negative than the parents. Nearly four out of ten boarders (37.7%) thought their views made no or not much difference, compared with nearly a quarter of parents (24%).

In their comments boarders were clear that they thought it was **important that their views were taken into account**, not just listened to: “The pupils need to be able to give their opinions about their care more often and to

*feel and recognise that their contributions **DO** make a difference.”*

The extent to which schools asked boarders about **food**, and took action in response, was quoted in many boarders' comments about being listened to: *“Feedback from students is not necessarily taken into consideration from kitchen staff.”*

Having found what parents and boarders think happens now, we asked both groups whether boarders should have more (or less) **say in how schools work**. Over two thirds of the boarders (69%) thought boarders should have more say; interestingly, 42% of the parents agreed. However, more than a quarter of boarders (29%) thought the amount of say they had was 'about right', and half (51%) the parents agreed with this.

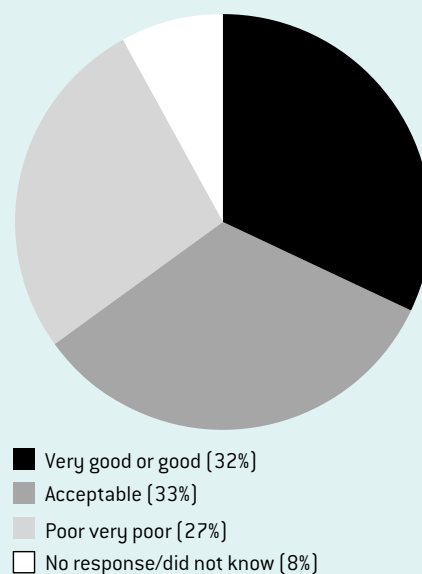
## Listening to parents

Having asked in detail about how well schools ask boarders for their views and how far those views made a difference, we wanted to discover what parents themselves thought about these questions. First we asked parents how good they thought boarding schools were at asking parents for their views about how the school works. The ratings offered were: very good, good, acceptable, poor, and very poor. The results appear in the chart opposite.

It is interesting that parents believed that schools ask about their views less well than they ask about boarders' views, and that boarders were more positive than their parents about how well schools consulted them.

Two major but distinct points of view came through in the comments parents made. Some saw **communication between parents and school as a continuous (and usually satisfactory) process**: *“The staff feel more like friends and I have no qualms about*

How good are schools at asking parents' views?



*contacting and expressing my views to all of them from the head down.”*

However, other parents thought that communication between parents and staff was confined to the **more formal process of parents' meetings**. One wrote: *“Parents access to the teaching staff should be increased to termly meetings, not once a year.”* Another: *“Parent/teacher meetings are extremely helpful – one termly would be advantageous (though perhaps stressful for teachers?).”* A third was uncertain how they were expected to communicate with the school other than in formal parents' meetings: *“It is always helpful to know the correct way to communicate with the school if there is anything one needs to talk about between parents' evenings.”*

*“The pupils need to be able to give their opinions about their care more often and to feel and recognise that their contributions **DO** make a difference.”*

Parents could be positive about how a school cared for their children, but still highly critical of how well the school listened to parental views. One wrote both that the school was *“strong on pastoral – house staff are amazingly patient and rounded and don’t seem to mind being on duty around the clock”*, but also that its *“so-called canvassing of views was risibly partisan and not worth printing.”*

Different parents gave us diametrically opposed views on how well their schools encouraged or discouraged **parents’ contact with their children**. One parent wrote about *“the flexibility of access to one’s children – parents were always able to take their children out. The housemaster’s view was that ‘we are not here to keep parents away from their*

*children’.*” Another wrote that they were *“given impression should shut up and go away from housemistress. Parents are unwelcome distraction to their children.”*

Parents’ ratings for how much difference they thought their views made to the way boarding schools work are summarised in the chart.

The responses offered were: very much, quite a lot, some, not much, and not at all.

More parents thought their **views made more difference** than boarders thought boarders’ views did. Parents also thought that more difference was made by parental views than by boarders’ views.

*“I have no qualms about contacting and expressing my views to all [the staff] from the head down.”*

How much do parents’ views make a difference to the school?



Very much or quite a lot (37%)  
 Some (32%)  
 Not much or not at all (21%)  
 No response/did not know (10%)

Having said what they thought happens now, parents were also asked whether they thought that they as parents should have more or less **say in how boarding schools work**. Over half (56%) thought that the amount of say they had was ‘about right’; 40% thought they ought to have more say. One parent summarised this as being largely up to parents themselves: *“Parents of boarders are consumers in a major way – if your view is not being heard satisfactorily then put up or move the child – or insist on a voice. We expect our views to be considered.”*

The proportion of parents who thought the amount of say parents had was about right was similar to the proportion who also thought that the say boarders had was about right. The proportion of parents seeking more say for themselves was much the same as those who wanted more say for their children.

## 6 Making Complaints

### Key points

- About three quarters of boarders know how to complain to school – and the same proportion of parents think their child knows this too.
- Parents are more positive than boarders about the way boarding schools operate complaints procedures.
- A lot of parents and boarders are uncertain about the issue of complaints.

The National Minimum Standards for boarding schools stipulate that schools should have effective complaints procedures, I am required to report on how well complaints procedures work for children. We therefore asked boarders and parents whether boarders themselves knew how to make a complaint to the school. The findings are summarised in the chart below.

Nearly three quarters of boarders (73%) said that they knew how to make a complaint; a similar proportion of parents (74%) agreed that their children knew this. However, a quarter of boarders (26%) said that they **did not know how to complain** to school. Many parents were unaware of this, as only 8% of parents thought their children did not know how to make a complaint. However, 16% of parents admitted that they were not sure of the answer to this question.

Does the boarder know how to make a complaint to school?

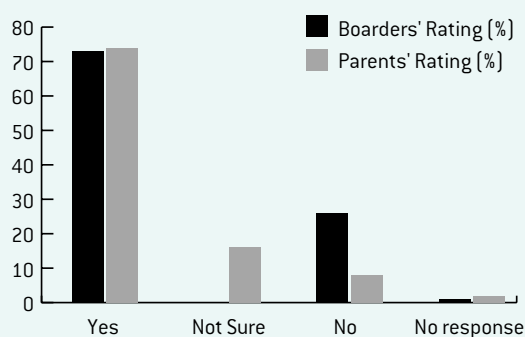
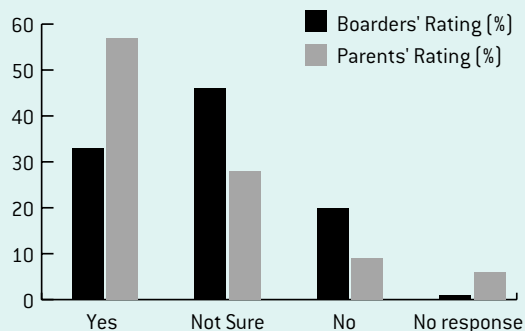


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Are you happy with the way boarding schools look into complaints?



As a separate question, we asked boarders and parents whether they were happy with how their schools looked into complaints. The answers appear in the chart above.

Overall, parents were more positive about school complaints procedures than boarders. However, a third of boarders (33%) were happy with how boarding schools look into complaints, while one in five (20%) were not.

*“Most complaints are dealt with very well, but if against a member of staff, the pupil’s complaints are usually dismissed.”*

Boarders who were not happy with their school’s response to complaints were generally concerned that **complaints were not taken up properly**, rather than concerned about the results of complaints that were taken up. A typical comment was: *“Nothing happens about the complaints we make.”*

Some boarders had more particular worries about what would happen if they made a **complaint about a member of staff**: *“What happens if you need to complain about a member of staff? What ensures that what is discussed will not be repeated in the deadly staff room and then*

*opinions changed?”* The same issue arose in parents’ comments: *“Most complaints are dealt with very well, but if against a member of staff, the pupil’s complaints are usually dismissed.”*

Written comments suggested that parents’ unhappiness with complaints procedures had more to do with the school’s responsiveness than with the outcome of the complaint: *“I had to make a nuisance of myself in order to be listened to.”*

Some parents wrote about the **importance of schools listening to children’s concerns**. As with many aspects of boarding, this can differ markedly between schools, or even between age groups. A preparatory school parent wrote: *“I feel it should be compulsory for schools to enable pupils to speak without fear of consequences about anything that worries them. I believe most senior boarding schools take this matter much more seriously.”*

However, there was a lot of **uncertainty about the issue of complaints** among both parents and boarders. Nearly half the boarders (46%) said that they were ‘not sure’ whether they were happy with school complaints procedures; over a quarter (28%) of parents said the same thing. For many people, being able to say whether or not you were happy with how complaints are sorted out depends on whether you have actually made a complaint or know how someone else has fared in using the procedure.

Leaving out those who were unsure about how to answer, 62% of the boarders able to give an opinion about complaints procedures said they were happy with how boarding schools looked into complaints.

Some boarders wrote about how people in a boarding community could **help each other out with problems**, and that sometimes older



pupils could be more approachable with a problem than either school staff or parents, without using a formal complaints system: *“I also like having older people to talk to in the house, so that you don’t always have to tell a teacher or your parents, because I find it easier to talk to someone in an older year.”*

We also asked parents whether they knew how to make a complaint to their child’s boarding school if they needed to. The great majority of parents (90%) said that they did know how to make a complaint to the school – but a worrying 9% said that they did not know how to.

*“I also like having older people to talk to in the house, so that you don’t always have to tell a teacher or your parents.”*

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## 7 Looking after Boarders

### Key point

- Parents and boarders believe that schools look after boarders well.

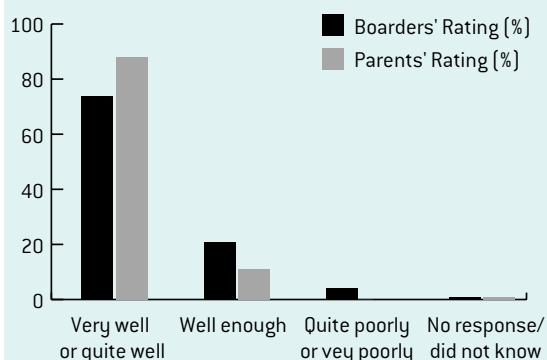
Our final question was the one that sums it all up. We asked both boarders and their parents to give us an overall rating of how well boarding schools looked after boarders. The ratings offered were: very well, quite well, well enough, quite poorly, and very poorly. The chart below sets out the results.

These are **very positive results for boarding schools**. Three quarters of boarders (74%) said that their boarding school was looking after them very or quite well. Over a third (37%) commended boarding schools as having

looked after them very well. Only 4% of boarders thought their schools had looked after them anything less than 'well enough'.

Parents were even more satisfied than boarders with the care their children received at school. Not a single parent rated boarding schools as having looked after their children less well than 'well enough', and 88% said that their children had been looked after quite or very well. Almost two thirds (62%) commended the schools as having looked after their children very well.

How well has the boarder been looked after at boarding school?





## 8 Inspections and Questionnaires

Although we did not ask a specific question about it, some parents and boarders commented to us about our own questionnaire, about the rules (or standards) for boarding schools, and about inspections of boarding generally.

One boarder ended their questionnaire with a cautionary note, both for us in asking about boarding and for the staff who look after boarders in schools. This summed up the comments of a number of others: **“Try not to analyse everything so much. A boarding school isn’t like a little cage of animals that you’re studying – it’s not that complicated. For a small establishment such as ours, life is simply summed up on respect and happiness. We know the rules of how to live and you just act like you basically would at home. In my final year I can say that the number of petty rules that bind us are unnecessary and wouldn’t be applied to a day school or to anyone’s home life. Such as electric testing on all appliances brought from home.”**

Some parents were **unaware of standards and welfare (as opposed to educational) inspections**, but wished their children’s schools to be subject to both: *“I hope there are guidelines for boarding houses. I hope this is monitored and checked at least once in a school year. It would be good if the parents get insight into the report an inspector makes on the boarding houses.”* Others wrote: *“Is there any assessment of boarding facilities or inspection? If there is I am not aware of it and*

*would like to be”; “a national standard for boarding schools should be compulsory”; “boarding schools should be inspected more regularly by an independent assessor.”*

However, these views were not universal. One parent told us that in their view the *“entire educational system would benefit from fewer questionnaires of this nature.”*

Boarders had wide-ranging views about boarding schools being inspected to see how well boarders are being looked after. One boarder spoke for many in assessing the **balance needed** between rules that make life better for boarders and rules that are unnecessary and restrict things too much: *“I would like to see traditional pursuits upheld and not diminished by some organisation that feels it right to stop children having fun because there is some element of risk involved. However, there have been certain rules laid out which on the whole, but not always, have been*

*“For a small establishment such as ours, life is simply summed up on respect and happiness. We know the rules of how to live and you just act like you basically would at home.”*

*“Boarding schools should be inspected more regularly by an independent assessor.”*

*constructive. The Child Act, for example, has visibly reduced the amount of bullying.”*

*Another asked, “does a trip to a local Indian restaurant really require a risk assessment?”, and a third stressed the importance of inspectors regularly checking that staff stay good at caring for children: “Maybe you should arrange for them to be checked every half year to see if they are still*

*good.” Some thought this survey was a good way of giving a voice to pupils about their schools: “I feel that more of these questionnaires should be sent.”*

Another boarder called for **consultations with pupils on safety and welfare standards** and for also for changes to those with unintended negative consequences: *“talk to boarding pupils about health and safety/care standard guidelines. Some guidelines are aimed to make our boarding lives better when in fact they can divide a house and have effects contrary to their design.”*

We are indeed now talking to boarders – and schools – about these standards, about how they are working in practice, and about any future changes needed to them.

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If you have any comments regarding this report please send them to:

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We particularly welcome feedback from children and young people.

**Children's Website [www.rights4me.org.uk](http://www.rights4me.org.uk)**

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