

Boarding schools: an opportunity to improve outcomes for vulnerable children

Introduction and background

As of September 2014 there were 40 state boarding schools. Of these, 27 were academies, 2 were free schools, 8 were maintained schools and 3 were FE colleges. It is a small but expanding sector. Data from the 2013-14 State Boarding School Association indicates that there is boarding capacity for around 4,700 pupils. Approximately 15 per cent of boarding places are taken up by children whose parents serve in the Armed Forces. Around 4 per cent of boarders receive assistance with fees, with only a small number of these receiving assistance from a local authority. The vast majority of assistance is provided by charities or other sources.

In the independent sector, boarding schools are a thriving sector with around 400 schools across the country. Fees for independent boarding schools are higher than the charges for state boarding as independent schools charge for tuition as well as extended day services and boarding provision. An independent school may, however, be able to offer more in terms of fee reduction through a bursary either from the school itself or from a charitable trust.

The DfE states in this report that there are opportunities to increase the availability of state and independent boarding to vulnerable children who, for various reasons, do not get the support which they need early enough. Boarding schools would welcome more applications for boarding places for vulnerable children and this guidance has been produced in order to help with the identification of vulnerable children for whom boarding may be an appropriate and cost effective option. The full report is accompanied by a series of case studies which give examples of how individual pupils' lives and outcomes have benefitted from boarding.

Key findings

Benefits of boarding

- There is research evidence conducted by both the Royal National Children's Foundation (RNCF) in 2007 and by Buttle UK in 2012 which found a link between boarding environment and educational outcomes for vulnerable children.
- The children most likely to benefit from boarding are those who are looked after by the local authority or those at risk of entering care in the future. These young people will be in a situation where continuing to live with their birth family is becoming unsustainable and they have:
 - links with their family network, but the links may be fragile or chaotic, and full-time, long-term care by the wider family is not possible;
 - average to good educational potential or an identified talent; and
 - good attachments and the ability to make and sustain positive relationships.
- Local authorities (LAs) which place children in boarding provision believe that it is the most appropriate placement and that it improves outcomes along with being cost effective. They believe that it alters the trajectory of vulnerable children. One LA stated that 'It is not about saying that they will get a better education, because they

won't. It is enabling them to learn there, which wouldn't normally be possible because of a chaotic home life'.

- The specific benefits offered by boarding schools include an extended range of education, supervised homework time, before and after school activities and high quality pastoral care.

Identification of children who may benefit

- It is important for LAs to ensure that the assessment process for identifying vulnerable children who may benefit from boarding is multi-agency and holistic.
- The authority must first of all ask whether the child is vulnerable, i.e. are they in need because there is a risk to their well-being, either because they may be at risk of harm and/or they do not have the opportunity to achieve. The child's family may be dealing with a range of issues such as mental illness, physical disability, illness, drug or alcohol problems or domestic violence.
- A vulnerable child may often be cared for by siblings, grandparents or other family members because of the death of their parents or their parents' inability to look after them.
- An LA needs to recognise that circumstances will be different for children whose parents have full responsibility



to those for whom they already have responsibility through a child in care order.

Criteria for placing a child in boarding school

- The child most likely to have the best outcomes from boarding school will not have severe behaviour problems or need for specialist support.
- In terms of age, each child's circumstances will be different, but some general advice from local authorities and schools is that:
 - caution should be exercised in considering boarding school for primary age pupils for reasons of maturity.
 - a key transition stage in the child's life may be a suitable time to consider boarding, e.g. at year 7, year 9 or year 12. Wherever possible, a placement should be planned at least six months ahead of the start of the first term.
- The child must be properly informed about the opportunity to go to boarding school and what it would mean for them. The child will also need to visit the proposed school before any decision is made. They must actively want to go to boarding school.
- The family or primary carers must be fully involved in the choice and be committed to the idea, having been fully informed.
- All stakeholders must be aware that boarding is a long-term option. Parents and LAs need to be clear that their commitment to supporting the children they place will continue until those children leave school at 16 or 18. LAs will need to consider whether the child's parents are willing to make this long-term commitment. They must also consider whether they themselves are prepared financially and otherwise for the long term.
- The local authority needs to consider whether it would continue to pay for a boarding placement were the child to be returned home from care. An unwillingness to do so could have a significant impact on the child's educational stability.

Out of term support

- An LA will need to ensure that a vulnerable child placed in a boarding school will have a stable placement for holiday periods, with as much consistency in carers as possible. The child must have a significant adult figure with whom they can spend holidays and who has a good relationship with them.

Finding a suitable placement

- Vulnerable children often have particular challenges such as poor educational attainment or behavioural difficulties. Careful discussion will be needed with a proposed school in order to ensure that they feel able to meet these challenges. The child should also be involved in this process and their wishes taken into account.
- Prior to the placement being agreed, a detailed plan for supporting the child should be agreed between the LA, the school, and where appropriate, the parents. The school will have to be made aware of any safeguarding issues, e.g. contact restrictions.

- A further consideration is the location of the school. Some children may have secure and positive attachments to their home, although they cannot, for various reasons, live there full-time. In most cases, this should not pose a problem, as LAs will work with boarding schools which are in their area.
- There may be circumstances where the LA feels that an out-of-authority placement is clearly in the child's best interests. A decision to place at a distance may, for example, be made for the child's safety or to remove them from negative influences.

Funding

- There are a range of potential funding sources for boarding school places. Many schools offer scholarships for children who are talented in a particular area. Schools may also offer bursaries, either directly, or in partnership with charitable organisations, where financial assistance is offered. Schemes vary widely and interested parties should contact a proposed school directly.
- Places at boarding school may also be funded by LAs through the Schools Budget and/or the children's services budget, grants from charitable trusts and families.
- The LA will need to compare costs between schools and with the costs of other care options. Investing in the child to prevent family breakdown or the development of more complex problems can in fact be extremely cost effective.
- LAs may be interested in the Assisted Boarding Network which was established by the RNCF and which has helped local authorities to make placements ever since its launch in 2011.
- Charges for boarding provision in state boarding schools range from £8,500 to about £15,000 per year. Charges in independent schools are higher, as they include a tuition cost.

Admission arrangements

- Timing of applications to boarding schools is important. The demand for places is high and the opportunity for in year admissions is often severely limited.
- A school will require full information about a vulnerable child for whom a place is being sought. They will also want to interview children to assess their suitability for boarding. Some schools may also have specific selection criteria.
- State boarding schools have to comply with the School Admissions Code which requires state boarding schools to give priority in their oversubscription criteria in the following order:
 - a) looked after and previously looked after children
 - b) children of members of the UK Armed Forces who qualify for Ministry of Defence financial assistance
 - c) children with a 'boarding need', making it clear what this is

Independent boarding schools do not have to adhere to the Code and should therefore be approached directly.

The full document can be downloaded from :

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/boarding-schools-improving-outcomes-for-vulnerable-children>