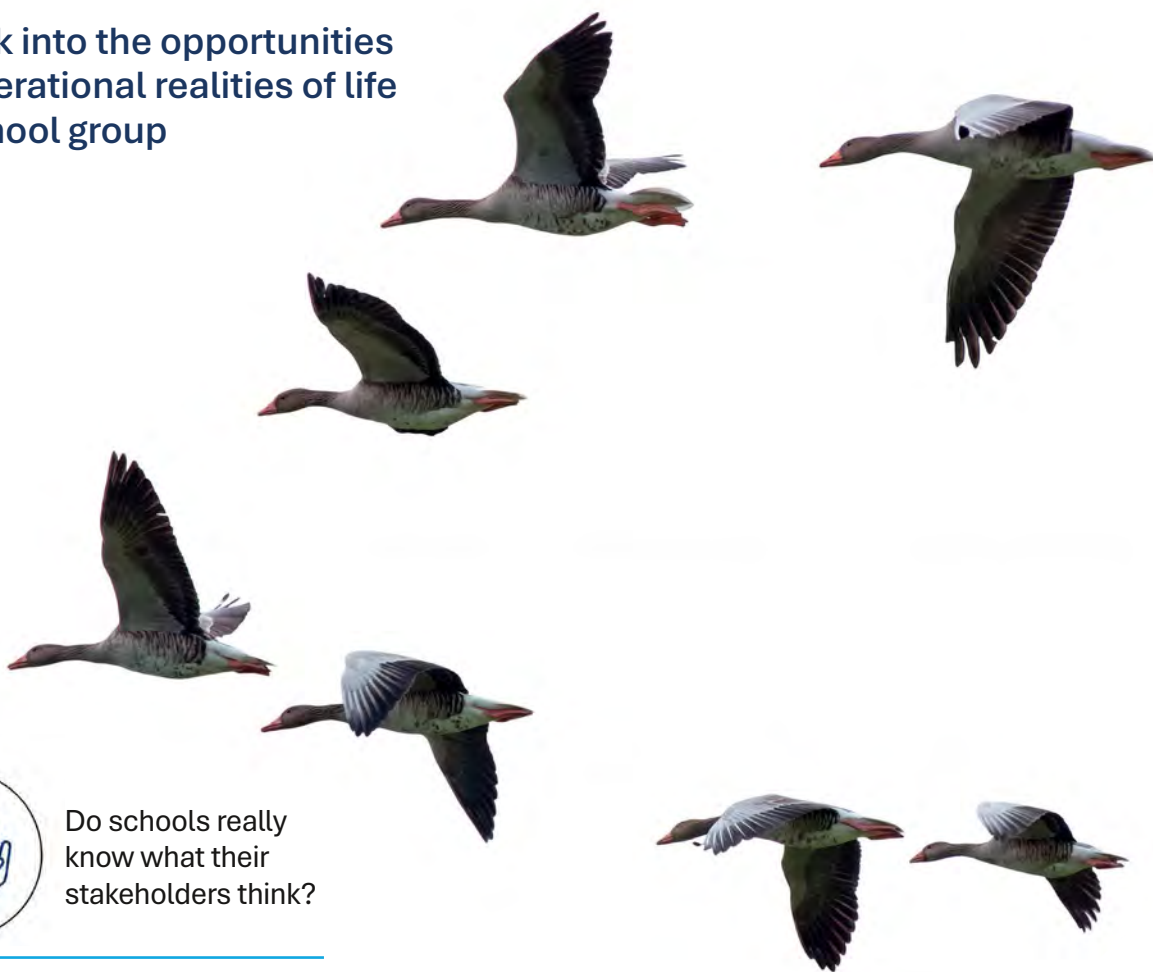


Thinking of joining the flock?

We look into the opportunities and operational realities of life in a school group



Do schools really know what their stakeholders think?



From awareness to action against AI-powered financial fraud



Practical questions when considering consolidation and outsourcing



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Welcome to the Summer issue

For those of you who do not yet know me, allow me to introduce myself as ISBA's new chief executive. My background lies in charitable and membership associations, but my own children benefitted from an independent school education so I have a very personal connection to this sector and am very excited to be working with you.

I had the pleasure of meeting many of you at May's Annual Conference in ICC Wales and it has been fantastic to hear how much members appreciate the services, support and guidance that ISBA offers. My goal now is to ensure that the bar remains high and that we continue to meet your needs as ISBA moves into a new phase. In May, we announced our intention to merge with AGBIS, creating a single professional association that represents both bursars and governance. Subject to the necessary approvals, we anticipate the merger taking effect in January 2027.

If you have any comments or questions about the proposed merger, or suggestions about how ISBA can best support you and your school, I would be delighted to hear from you. Please use the QR code to contact us.



ISBA and AGBIS are not the only ones in the sector that see the benefits of a merger; many independent schools are exploring mergers, partnerships and group structures. In this issue's special feature (starting on page 38), articles examine the different structures that school groups may adopt and, importantly, how to get the full potential benefits. We also spoke with bursars to get their real-life experiences of group work and what new career opportunities school groups can offer.

Of course, school groups aren't for everyone. Many of you are extremely passionate about standing alone or feel that a group structure is not the correct fit for your school. As an association



supporting schools of all sizes and types, we have aimed to ensure there is something relevant and insightful for every reader in this issue. Other topics covered include cyber preparedness, financial fraud, the Employment Rights Act, gaining stakeholder feedback and onboarding new staff.

This issue, we also bid farewell to David Woodgate, who has spent the past 10 years at ISBA. I would like to thank him for his exceptional generosity in sharing his time and knowledge of the sector during our handover. We asked him to reflect on his career and what lies ahead for ISBA on page 81.

Summer is often a time for reflection and planning. While many of you will be focused on preparing for the new academic year, managing projects and supporting your school communities through change, I hope you are also able to enjoy some well-earned time to rest and recharge over the coming weeks.

As always, don't hesitate to contact us if you need support or guidance: advice@theisba.org.uk

Catherine Spencer
Chief Executive, ISBA

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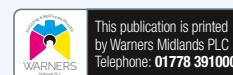
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COVER STORY



Around 45 percent of ISBA's member schools are now part of some form of group arrangement – and 23 percent are in groups comprising six or more schools. These structural shifts are (or should be) changing how schools operate.

Special section: Thinking of joining the flock?

- 38** What do groups offer and what should you consider?
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→ Top Tips

Out of all the articles in this issue of The Bursar's Review, we have flagged up some of the most critical topics for you to think about:

6 Versatile boarding accommodation

- Boarding houses should be integral components of the wider campus that enhance the pupil experience and broaden commercial opportunities
- As recruitment challenges grow, converting boarding rooms into staff housing could prove strategically valuable

12 Do you really know what your stakeholders think?

- Stakeholder voice can help sharpen resource allocation
- Listening only improves outcomes when leaders act on what they hear

16 Employment law changes

- Review all your contracts, policies, probation and consultation processes
- Train your managers on the changes and emerging risks

20 Action against AI-powered financial fraud

- AI hasn't just made fraud more sophisticated. It has made it feel normal
- Urgent requests should be a trigger for verification rather than a reason to move faster

24 Cyber preparedness starts with governors

- Schools are being deliberately targeted by cyber criminals
- Recovery from a ransomware incident typically ranges from 10 to 24 days

28 Rethinking debt in a changed market

- Engage with lenders before pressure becomes acute
- Refinancing is about demonstrating a clear, credible position

34 Onboarding new staff – principles for success

- Onboarding is one of the few junctures at which a school has near complete influence over the experience
- A personalised onboarding approach supports faster, more effective contribution

42 School groups and new career opportunities

- Senior group-level roles are now emerging that didn't exist before
- Agility and willingness to stay open to new opportunities can help your next career step

48 Get the full benefits from a school group

- Support from parents is significantly stronger when they understand the rationale for a merger and the potential benefits
- Centralised estates or functions can enhance consistency, resilience and governance oversight

56 Structuring mergers: choosing the right model in a changing landscape

- Schools remain an attractive investment for private capital
- There are three key models often seen in school mergers; each has pros and cons

60 Back office, front foot: consolidation and outsourcing

- Go back to basics and work out what you need to deliver your outputs
- Be realistic about the costs of change

63 Governance in groups

- While committees add value, they also create risks
- Boards should spend less time listening to reports and more time discussing implications

66 Supervision as a safeguarding safeguard

- Supervision should take place routinely and not just in response to crises
- Supervision requires protected time within workloads

69 Strengthening financial sustainability through smarter employee benefits

- Employee benefits should be treated as a strategic financial tool
- Managing staff absence proactively is critical to reducing financial pressure

76 Managing concussion

- Females are at a higher risk and often take longer to recover from concussion than males
- Recognising concussion must be learned through education and experience

79 Governance of satellite schools abroad

- Establish clear governance structures, dedicated oversight committees and sufficient administrative support
- Each party must understand precisely where authority lies and where accountability rests



Boarding houses can support a school's identity and **broaden commercial opportunities**

As recruitment challenges grow, the ability to **convert boarding rooms into staff housing** could prove strategically valuable

Adequate storage, robust access control systems and **clear operational policies are essential**

Boarding house illustration to show initial considerations

Designing your boarding accommodation for versatility

Boarding houses should not be viewed as static residential blocks used only by pupils. They should be integral components of the wider campus that can enhance the pupil experience and broaden commercial opportunities.

Every element of an independent school's estate needs to contribute meaningfully to educational excellence, financial resilience and long-term sustainability – including boarding accommodation.

Boarding accommodation is often perceived as a fixed asset with predictable term-time occupancy and limited seasonal use, but with the right strategy, boarding houses can support a school's identity and broaden commercial opportunities. The most successful schools increasingly view boarding accommodation not as fixed residential stock, but as a strategic estate asset capable of supporting education, recruitment, wellbeing and commercial resilience.

Setting the vision

A successful estate strategy needs a vision. Schools need to ensure they have a masterplan that aligns the physical campus with the school's strategic ambitions. The first step is to articulate the school's unique selling points and what distinguishes it in a crowded marketplace. Is it academic excellence, pastoral care, sporting achievement, location, international outlook or a distinctive co-educational ethos? Only once this vision is clearly defined can the built environment be shaped to support and amplify it.

This vision must be driven by senior leadership and governors yet also informed by the experience of staff and pupils. A shared understanding ensures that the estate strategy is not an abstract

exercise, but a process that supports day-to-day operations and enhances the pupil and staff experience.

Within this framework, boarding accommodation should be considered as a key part of the masterplan. Its location is critical – if a boarding house is to be used by external groups at weekends or during holidays, safeguarding and access control become paramount. Separate entrances, the ability to isolate zones, and clear circulation routes are essential if external guests arrive while pupils remain on site. Integration with transport arrangements, particularly safe pick-up and drop-off points, must also be factored into the masterplan from the outset.

Once the overarching vision is established, attention should turn to utilisation and timetabling, but many schools are not maximising the space they already possess. While scrutiny often focuses on classroom timetabling, boarding accommodation is rarely examined with the same rigour.

A detailed review of how spaces are used, supported by occupancy surveys and user analysis, can reveal inefficiencies and underused areas. Why are certain common rooms rarely occupied? Could a study area double as a seminar room? Could clusters of bedrooms be temporarily reconfigured to provide short-course accommodation? Consideration might also be given to future staff accommodation. As recruitment challenges grow, the ability to convert boarding rooms into staff housing could prove strategically valuable. ➔



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Spatial optimisation is not simply about squeezing more into less; it is about aligning space provision with actual need. Understanding how many boarding rooms could become viable classroom spaces or a staff flat enables strategic thinking about future changes of use.

Assets from a different era

At a time when relatively few schools are investing in entirely new boarding houses, and many are reassessing or scaling back boarding provision, the ability to adapt and repurpose existing accommodation has become increasingly important. Many schools operate boarding houses designed in a different era, reflecting lesser expectations. Shared bathroom facilities, limited accessibility and poor natural light no longer meet the standard that pupils and parents aspire to and expect, particularly as fees rise and competition intensifies.

A holistic review of older accommodation is therefore essential. This review should extend beyond the visible fabric of the building to consider more subtle qualities, such as light, views, accessibility, acoustic comfort, security and overall contribution to campus life.

Comprehensive physical surveys are also required to examine the structure, services and building fabric. Only with a clear understanding of structural capacity, drainage locations and service

infrastructure can informed decisions be made about refurbishment, reconfiguration or potential replacement. Each building should not be treated as an isolated entity. A masterplan strategy should consider how the boarding accommodation as a whole can evolve to support future growth and shifting demographics.

This assessment should include a condition assessment. Many of the buildings, whilst not suitable in their internal layout, will be in good condition. Refurbishment and reconfiguration of existing spaces can provide a more cost-effective and lower-carbon approach to enhancing boarding accommodation, often delivering significant embodied-carbon savings and reduced construction disruption when compared with wholesale replacement. This reconfiguration can often lead to optimising the available space to provide both accommodation and support for new commercial ventures in the spaces.

Making boarding houses flexible and adaptable

Today, competition for pupils is fierce, and rising fees heighten parental expectations. Overseas pupils may require different pastoral arrangements, dietary facilities or holiday provision. Faith considerations may influence room layouts or communal spaces. Gender identity and co-educational models also require thoughtful design responses, particularly where legacy buildings were conceived for single-sex occupancy. Moreover, as co-educational provision becomes more common, boarding houses may need to accommodate different age groups or genders within the same footprint, while maintaining safeguarding and pastoral integrity.

To be able to respond to shifts in pupil mix without major structural intervention, schools should consider an estates strategy that has adaptable accommodation clusters, inclusive bathroom arrangements and responsive zoning. In other words: flexibility is crucial to adapt boarding houses for the modern world.

Cluster arrangements can be particularly effective for part-time boarding, enabling discrete areas to be shut down when unoccupied, reducing energy consumption and operational costs. The right furniture design can also enhance adaptability. Modular units that integrate sleeping, living and storage functions can be packed away or removed entirely, allowing rooms to be repurposed whilst ensuring pupils' personal space and effects are maintained. This approach not only facilitates dual use but also enables aesthetic refreshment as tastes and expectations evolve.

Common rooms should be conceived as genuinely multi-use spaces, capable of hosting study sessions, social gatherings or external events depending on the time of day. Smart access controls are now available that allow precise zoning. Zoned heating systems, low-occupancy water management and high-performance building fabric can also reduce operational costs and carbon footprint alike.

Alternative and commercial uses

Boarding accommodation need not lie dormant during holidays or quieter periods. Alternative uses can generate significant additional income and strengthen community partnerships. For example, venue hires at weekends, holiday camps, international summer 



 AI generated communal area

IT leasing reinvented

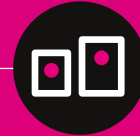
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Masterplan strategy diagram

schools and sports team hosting all present opportunities. Many schools are already demonstrating the value of this approach. One of our independent school clients for example, uses its boarding accommodation and wider estate to support residential hires, sports facilities lettings and wider community use, helping maximise estate utilisation beyond term-time. Where sporting facilities are of a high standard, boarding houses can support tournaments or training camps. In certain locations, weddings, conferences, or film and television productions may also be viable.

Partnerships with local businesses that provide short-term accommodation for training programmes or corporate events can further enhance utilisation. However, successful alternative use depends on careful design and management. Adequate storage, robust access control systems and clear operational policies are essential and the boarding house must be capable of transitioning smoothly between pupil and commercial use without compromising safeguarding or educational priorities.

It is beneficial if these commercial opportunities align with the school's vision to further strengthen key characteristics and brand.

Future-proofing the estate

Future-proofing the boarding accommodation allows for future long-term versatility and enhances the asset value. Since VAT has been applied to fees, we have experienced a reduction in the number of pupils boarding, or, if they are still boarding, it is often at a reduced rate. Therefore, it is important that flexibility is built into boarding houses to future-proof them for alternative uses, whether that be alternative accommodation or the ability to transition into teaching and pastoral spaces.

Many of the design principles for future-proofing boarding accommodation can also apply to the wider campus. Getting the basics right, such as optimal orientation, generous natural light and robust insulation, can all reduce the need for expensive retrofitting later.

Structural design is equally critical. Logical spans and carefully positioned structural elements can allow future reconfiguration without major intervention. Lightweight, demountable partitions

enable rooms to be resized or repurposed with minimal disruption and concentrating service cores, particularly drainage stacks and washroom zones, frees the remainder of the plan for multi-functional use. Adequate service voids and risers ensure that new technologies can be introduced as they emerge, while heating and water systems designed for variable occupancy prevent waste and support sustainability goals.

Perhaps most importantly, core elements should not be overly tailored to a single brief. If a cluster of boarding rooms can be equivalent to a set of classrooms meeting standard space requirements, then the building gains greater long-term operational versatility and commercial resilience. While specialist departments may require dedicated infrastructure, much of the estate can and should be designed to accommodate change.

By starting with a vision rather than an assessment of individual buildings, integrating boarding within a holistic campus strategy and embedding future-proofing principles at every level, schools position themselves to respond to demographic shifts, rising expectations and financial pressures. In doing so, they create environments that not only house pupils, but actively enhance wellbeing, strengthen identity and secure sustainable growth.

Schools that approach boarding accommodation strategically rather than operationally will be best placed to remain financially resilient, educationally distinctive and operationally agile in the years ahead. In an era of rapid change, a vision and a masterplan provide clarity. With the right strategy, boarding accommodation can become a powerful instrument in a school's long-term success.



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