

A young boy with light brown hair and freckles, wearing a light blue school shirt and a dark tie, is leaning over a desk, focused on writing in a notebook with a red pen. In the background, other students in similar uniforms are visible, along with a red door and a bulletin board. The scene is set in a classroom.

# Boarding Chances for Children Impact Report

Support for Boarding 2020-21

chancesFOR  
**CHILDREN**  
BUTLEuk

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## INTRODUCTION

Buttle UK was established in 1953 to champion the vision of Frank Buttle, who strived his whole life to lift deprived children out of a life of poverty. With the endowment fund established in his name, Buttle UK provides Chances for Children grants to children and young people, aiming to support a safe, nurturing environment to grow up in and increased capacity to engage with education, furthering the life chances of those in need. The majority of these Chances for Children grants take the form of the individually tailored provision of items and experiences up to the value of £2,000, primarily focused on providing essential resources which aid in recovery from a crisis or crises including neglect, drug and alcohol misuse, family breakdown and domestic, physical, sexual and emotional abuse. However, Buttle UK also supports those living in exceptional circumstances by offering grants which allow children to attend boarding school provision. These exceptional circumstances can be caused by bereavement or occur when a parent or carer's capacity is severely affected by long-term parental or sibling illness and disability. There will also be the common factor of exposure to severe and ongoing poverty which is an essential aspect on application. Sadly, some families are at the tipping point of a crisis completely overwhelming the household, with children at risk of being placed into formal care. Providing funding for a boarding school place offers the child or young person a space to thrive and the family some relief to cope with the crisis or ongoing issues.

In the 2020-21 academic year, 107 pupils were supported by Boarding Chances for Children at the cost of £804,841. Primarily offered to young people in Years 7-11 (with some exceptional support in Years 12 and 13), Buttle UK works with the boarding school to split the fees, with each party providing 55% of the costs. The additional 10% is provided to ensure that the family is not disadvantaged by financial circumstances which can limit their child's engagement with the broad and extensive opportunities offered by the school. A number of students who were funded before 2018 are supported by a different model, where Buttle UK contributes £4,500 towards the fees, supplemented by other charities and bursaries. While the cost per pupil has increased, the newer model provides more stability and access for families, who no longer have to endure the stressful and often difficult cycle of securing and retaining a range of different sources of funding. This helps us to see a child right through to their GCSEs, with the aim of setting them off with the best life chances.

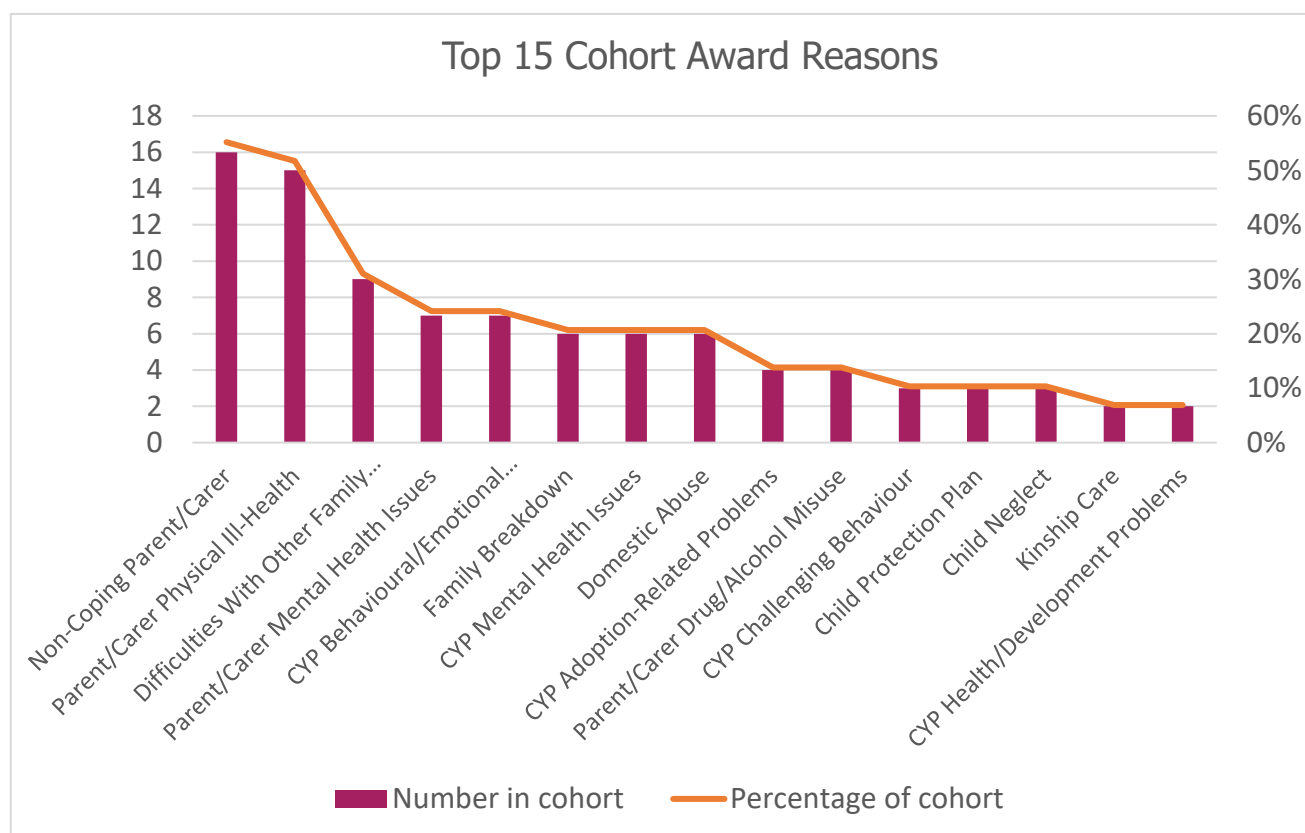
While our boarding programme is very much embedded within our overall strategy and Theory of Change, the costings and ongoing experiences of grantees who we support through boarding school differs quite widely to those receiving Chances for Children grants, and this creates the opportunity to explore its impact in greater depth. We evaluate the impact of our boarding grants in many different ways and at different points in the year. Therefore, we can report on the results of those who finished boarding school in the 2020-21 academic year, as well as the changes to educational engagement, attainment and social and emotional wellbeing for all of the boarding cohort. We also have the great privilege of presenting unique insights directly from our boarding grantees, following recent interviews with them.

# AN INSIGHT INTO OUR 2020-21 FINISHERS

## Section 1: Lived Experiences

While many factors are taken into account while evaluating applications for boarding grants, our model focuses on the specific circumstances that are causing trauma and difficulty in the home. We call these 'award reasons'. Many of these are considered Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are consistently shown to have deep impacts on the wellbeing, educational and emotional development of those experiencing them. ACEs create long-term consequences, with a hugely increased likelihood of experiencing negative life outcomes in the future. Poor mental and physical health, engaging in risky or criminal experiences and suffering or perpetuating abusive behaviour are just some of many examples<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, Buttle UK seeks to support children for whom remaining at home is likely to expose them to ongoing or worsening ACEs, in addition to the wider challenging circumstances that – though not officially categorised as ACEs – have similar impacts.

In Summer 2021, 24 students finished their GCSEs and a further 5 finished their A-Levels. Each in this cohort has their own unique and poignant lived experiences that led them to attending boarding school. The type of award reasons experienced in this cohort highlight the exceptionally difficult circumstances for each child or young person, and the often-toxic nature of their intersection.



<sup>1</sup> The British Psychological Society, *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*  
<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Briefing%20Paper%20-%20Adverse%20Childhood%20Experiences.pdf>

## Section 2: 2020-21 Cohort Award Reasons

### Physical Ill-Health or Disability

Ill-health and disability of parents and carers was an unfortunate reality in over half of this boarding cohort. Parents faced the multiple issues of difficulty working and earning, coping with their own pain or restrictions, seeking financial, medical and emotional support, all while trying to raise a family. In some cases, the parents were facing the prospect of their own or their partner's death. Some children were watching their parents undergoing treatment for terminal illnesses such as cancer, heart conditions or chronic lung disease, and in some cases in the end stages of their life. While the specific nature of the illnesses and disabilities that parents suffered varied, the majority cited the secondary difficulties of inappropriate living spaces, poor health support and high pain levels as making parenting very difficult. Many of the supported children were falling into the role of young carer, causing them to take on adult responsibilities such as providing physical care, or undertaking household duties. One young child was doing all of the cooking, washing up, cleaning and ironing on a daily basis. Boarding school gave a space away from the stress and responsibility of caring duties for illness and disability in the household.

### Non-Coping Parent or Carer

Many of the examples expressed in this chapter are contributing toward parents and carers being unable to cope, which was a factor in the applications of 55% of this cohort. As the most common award reason, it is clear that this is a serious and pervasive factor in the home. However, it could also be said that this is the issue most likely to cause *and* be caused by other ACEs. Unfortunately, children and young people suffer greatly when their care is not adequate, often meaning they are unable to thrive at school or home and in some cases putting them on a trajectory towards being taken into care or. Some families were unable to care adequately for their child due to overwhelming pressures and commitments beyond their control. This included families with the added difficulty of having many children, which was contributing to the household becoming overwhelmed. Some parents were themselves battling PTSD, trauma and attachment issues, which were causing a disconnect with their child(ren). Families were usually taking steps to overcome the challenges for the non-coping parent or carer by seeking external support, or arranging for additional assistance. However, applicants describe boarding school as a place that would give respite for both the child and the non-coping parent.

### Kinship Care *and* Adoption Issues

In cases of parental bereavement, children's care can often transfer to an elderly relative or an older sibling. 14% of this cohort were cared for by members of the extended family or a family friend - this often referred to as kinship care. Kinship carers are not entitled to the same financial assistance as foster carers, nor can they access support for the social and emotional difficulties that some children suffer so easily. Some kinship carers expressed hope that boarding school could be the key to retaining a loving relationship while allowing the child to access an excellent and well-equipped environment to grow up in. At application, grantees described households that were already physically or financially stretched, detailing the desire but lack of capacity to give the full care that a child might need. This extended to the need for mental health and emotional support due to the issues



which had brought the children into kinship care in the first place. Equally, a number of families with adopted children (7% of this cohort) were having a similar struggle; trauma and distress from early childhood was presenting itself in different ways and the families were under immense strain at the point of application.

### **Parental Mental Health Issues *and* Drug and Alcohol Misuse**

Mental health difficulties impact on children in many of the same ways as physical illness or disability in the home. Mental health issues were present in nearly a quarter of this cohort's parents and carers. On application, parents and carers describe the hopelessness they feel at trying to shield their child from the difficulties they are living through. What made it very difficult for some families is the lack of access to support and care for mental health issues, which was having devastating impacts on the ability of parents and carers to carry out tasks in and outside of the home. The child or young person needed a safe, stable environment away from the home to allow the parent or carer space to recover. Some of the parents and carers had experienced adverse circumstances themselves, either in childhood or in adulthood, which had led to parental substance abuse in 14% of the cohort. This caused immense stress for the whole family. In some cases, alcohol and drug misuse had led one or both parents to a prison sentence, and even death. Children raised in these households are at greater risk of abusing alcohol or drugs themselves, as well as bearing the impact of misuse in the household. Attendance at boarding school offers a haven away from negative influences, as well as giving parents a chance to seek support, and provide a better opportunity to overcoming their own issues.

### **Domestic Abuse**

As with our Chances for Children grants, domestic abuse was highly prevalent in applications for support for boarding from this cohort, with it being an award reason in over 20% of households. Escaping the abuse has left families with the additional burdens of homelessness, financial constraints and isolation from schools, friends or loved ones. The long-term impacts were complex, with children requiring ongoing counselling to recover from witnessing, or being subject to, violent domestic abuse. Some parents too were left with both physical and mental scars. These factors were leading to the child taking on more adult tasks, with a heavy burden of maturity and responsibility. Many of the families who reported domestic abuse also had a Child Protection Plan, which involved intervention from social services. Boarding school offered a holistic and supportive environment, with highly trained staff, on hand to manage this trauma. It also offered removal of the child from further risk of being exposed to domestic abuse, which was a risk factor in some of the households.

### **Family Breakdown**

Separation and divorce can cause a great deal of turmoil and distress in a child or young person's life and was a factor for 21% of this cohort. Many families spoke of shifting incomes, divided households and emotional upheaval, and the knock-on effect of this stress on the wellbeing of their child. Family breakdown can also be caused by desertion, leaving the remaining parent struggling as a single provider to one or more children. One single parent was left with seven children to care for, causing extreme stress and acute depression. The ability for two of the eldest to attend boarding school gave a lifeline to alleviate the strain on physical, emotional and financial resources. In many of these families, the cause of the breakdown itself often had resonating consequences that extend beyond

the divorce or separation. Upon application, many of our grantees describe the factors that lead to them becoming a single parent family, which include sexual, physical and emotional abuse. They also describe the difficulties of balancing working, health, family commitments and the needs of all of the children in the house. Sometimes, boarding school was needed for one or more children in the home, to offer the stability and permanence needed to cope with the emotional impacts of family breakdown. Parents felt they would be better able to work, earn, care for those remaining at home and give their best to their child when they came home from school.

### **Difficulties With Other Family Members**

In many of the cases that Buttle UK supports through boarding, a contributory factor has been the difficulties children and young people are experiencing with other family members – this was a factor in almost a third of this cohort. Sadly, some families were splintering apart due to the stresses (sometimes unintentionally) put on children in strained circumstances. In one such case, a young carer was expressing anger and risky behaviours towards their parent due to the immense pressure they were under. Siblings with developmental conditions such as Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder contribute to parents struggling to balance their care and attention equally, as well as some incidences of violence in the home. The latter can also be attributed to the complex living arrangements that many families have to accept in order to maintain enough income to get by. One family had no choice but to continue living with a perpetrator of violent crime due to a lack of support networks available to them. This led to a decline in the wellbeing of the child and their own capacity to thrive. Boarding school offered a space where they could be amongst friends and peers, without having to worry about the stress and problems they were living with at home.

### **Emotional, Mental Health and Behaviour Issues**

Sadly, many of the children supported in boarding school have themselves suffered from poor mental health (21% of cohort) or emotional problems (24% of cohort), with the latter sometimes contributing to challenging behaviours. These were often caused by the serious crises they had faced, such as abuse or neglect. In one family, a combination of bereavement and imprisonment led to severe impacts on the child's mental health resulting in anxiety, stress and attachment issues. Another family were forced to remain in the area where a serious sexual assault to a young family member had occurred, causing immense distress to all concerned. Overcoming these issues in a home which has not yet recovered from the crisis – or may still be in the middle of it – is a difficult task. Feedback from parents and carers shows the benefit of the wider holistic support that boarding schools can offer, with highly qualified staff and dedicated time and resources for managing these difficulties. Applications for this cohort also came from homes where the child's behaviour was having negative impacts on themselves and the household, on the cusp of being a contributory factor in the breakdown of their adoptive or foster placements. The stability and routine of boarding school offered a safe space for children with these behaviour issues. The house parents, teachers and wider support staff typically have the necessary training and appropriate techniques for managing challenging behaviour, offering solutions and strategies that can then be transferred to the home environment.

### **Health And Development Problems (Siblings and Grantee)**

Poor health in the household is not limited to parent or carers; a number of cases in this cohort were due to sibling or wider family members having debilitating illness and learning disabilities. While no family wants to separate siblings unless necessary, many households otherwise face incidences of ongoing violence, increased caring responsibilities and being unable to balance the attention and time each child requires. Some incidences of aggression and behaviour breakdowns saw grantees being attacked or harmed. Development problems were not limited to siblings; grantees themselves were struggling with low attendance at school, poor nutrition, inadequate sleep and other factors caused by living in poverty, which were contributing to poor health and reduced development. Some had historic issues from early childhood, particularly those in adoptive families, with issues such as Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and trauma-lead behaviours. In one family, self-harm was occurring due to trauma experienced as a baby, which was requiring a great deal of care to unpick with professional support. Their parents felt they would thrive in a small, home-from-home learning environment, rather than a large state school.

### **Child Neglect *and* Children Protection Plan**

In total, 10% of this cohort had a Child Protection Plan (CPP). There are a great many reasons why children may be put on to one, but once they are, there is an increased likelihood that the child or young person will be placed in the care system. The opportunity to attend boarding school as an alternative is therefore critical. For some of our children and young people, CPPs had been put in place as a result of concerns for the child's welfare. This was due to poor mental and physical health of the parent or child, violence and severe poverty in the home, dangerous or risky behaviours and, critically, evidence of neglect. Neglect occurs where a parent or carer cannot adequately care for the child or young person, be that through sufficient health provision, a safe environment, or the active parenting behaviours they engage with. Sadly, with all of our grantees living within households on low incomes, parents often cannot provide for all their child's needs. Children were going hungry, with ill-fitting clothes and poor living conditions; a handful of grantees were sharing beds with their siblings. This is where a grant for boarding school offers a lifeline.

## **Section 3: Summary**

As is clear from the examples above, children and young people who receive a boarding grant are living through some very difficult and adverse circumstances. There are other examples which represent rarer but extremely serious reasons why a young person has been supported to go to boarding school. In one heart-breaking case, a child, after his sibling was murdered, was experiencing so much risk to his own life in the local area that he could no longer attend school. In another household, parental imprisonment for child sexual abuse and serious domestic violence, left a family with a complex road to recovery. What is clear is the number of risk factors that each and every child is facing. It is the complex intersection of various ACEs and other risk factors that create home environments that cannot easily provide the safety, stability or nurture that children and young people need, and considerably lowers their capacity to engage in their education. As can be seen in the table below, every young person in this cohort was living with at least two significant award



reasons, while shockingly, 62% were facing four or more. While living through any number of adverse and stressful experiences as a child has serious impacts, research has shown that four or more considerably increases the likelihood of health-harming behaviours, committing violence, imprisonment, and serious illness in adulthood<sup>2</sup>.

Parents and carers apply for boarding grants with the hope of giving their child an opportunity to flourish. Boarding school offers this in many different ways. As well as providing a home-from-home environment which is secure, well-equipped and stable, the pastoral support and provision of counselling or mentoring can help aid recovery from trauma. The high-quality education and broad offer of extracurricular activities add a huge number of skills and experiences which play a part in children and young people's healthy development. Buttle UK is proud to support these young people and delighted to present their academic results, which reflect the fantastic ambition and effort these young people have put in to overcome their adversities.

Number of award reasons	N	Percentage
1	0	0%
2	2	7%
3	9	31%
4	11	38%
5	6	21%
6	1	3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100%</b>



<sup>2</sup> Public Health Scotland, *Adverse Childhood Experiences*  
<http://www.healthscotland.scot/population-groups/children/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces/overview-of-aces>

# THE 2020-21 EXAMINATION RESULTS

## Section 1: GCSE and A-Level Results

At the end of the 2020-21 academic year, 5 young people funded through our Support for Boarding grants finished their A-Levels and 24 young people finished their GCSEs, which were carried out by teacher assessment due to the cancellation of major exams following COVID-19 disruption. We have full results for 69% of these grantees (N=20). A summary of these results are as follows:

- The pass rate was **98.6%** for all GCSEs taken
- On average, each student took **8.8 subjects** at GCSE, above the national average of **7.85**.
- **93.4%** of students achieved a pass (9-4 or A\*-C) in their Maths and English GCSEs.
- **100%** of students received 5 or more GCSEs at 9-4 (A\*-C).

### Cohort average GCSEs results

Subject	Average result
Maths	6.3
English Language	6.6
English Literature	6.7
Biology	6.9
Chemistry	6.9
Physics	6.3
Double Science	6.3
History	6.2
Geography	7.6
Religious Studies	6.9
Computing	6.4
Design Tech.	7.3
Art	6.25
Music	8
Textiles	7
Physical Education	7.6
Spanish	7.3
German	7
French	5.9
Business Studies	6.6
Food Preparation	6.2
Drama	8
Classics	8 [outlier; only 1 result]

These outcomes are above the national average, as reported by the Office for National Statistics<sup>3</sup>. Nationally, 51.9% of pupils achieved a score of 5 or above (grade B and above) in the core subjects of English and Maths; this group stood at 86.6% attaining this achievement. Just under half (46.6%) of the group for whom we have results achieved Grade 7 and over in all of their GCSEs, which is double the national average of 23%.

This group's results inverted the conclusions of the Disadvantage Gap Index, which showed that the national 2020-21 cohort had a greater widening of the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their counterparts than had been seen in the last five years. Promisingly, all of the families who responded to the survey reported that their child is going to continue in their educational studies. The majority of the young people will be continuing at their boarding school, of whom three will be funded once more by Buttle UK due to continuing difficult circumstances at home. In terms of further qualifications, 83% of this group

<sup>3</sup> ONS, Key Stage 4 performance.

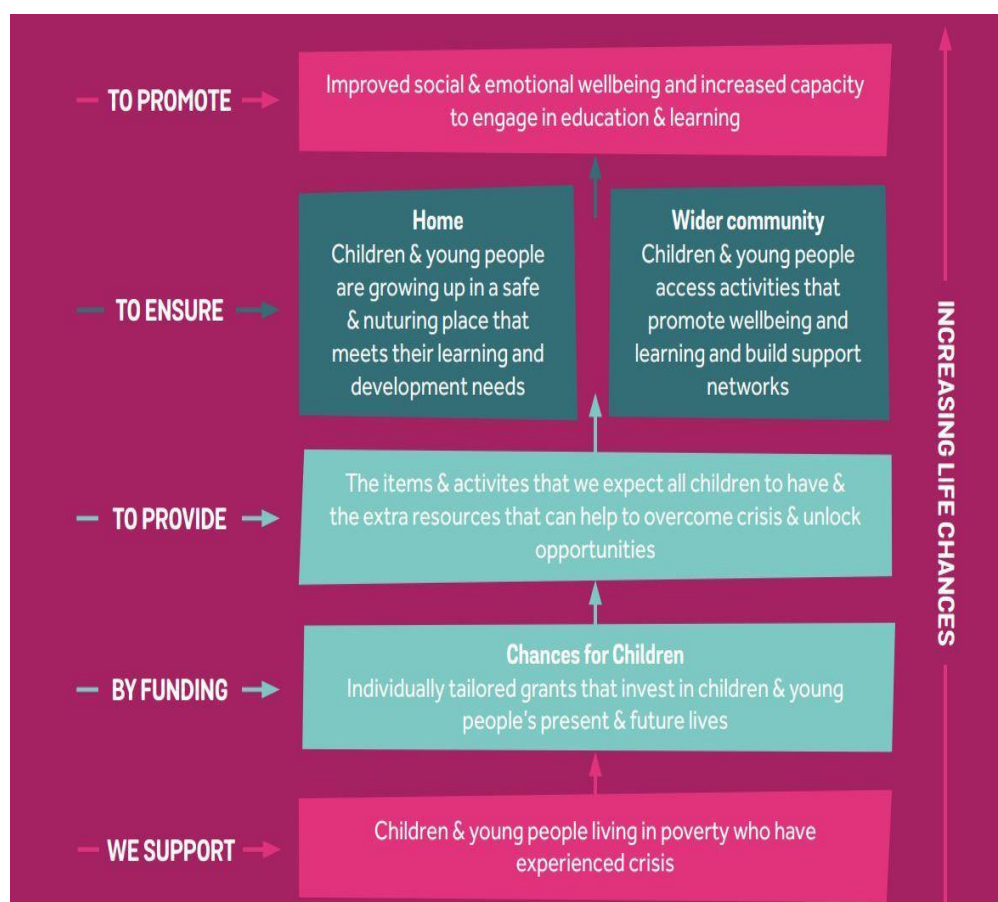
<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance-revised/2020-21>

of the cohort intend to take up A-Levels which include English Literature, Maths, Geography, Biology, PE, French, Sociology, Graphics and Drama. The remaining 17% are looking to undertake a BTEC in the subjects of Engineering and Business. The interest in taking on further education is very encouraging and reflects the reported improvement in their enjoyment since starting at boarding school (see further on in chapter).

From the five young people completing their A-levels, we have results for four. While this number is low, it is only in exceptional circumstances that we can fund students to A-Level. This requires evidence of continued adversity and high probability of trauma if returning to live at home. The results shown here are good, with all achieving passes at C or above. Promisingly, all four are intending to continue in further or higher education. Achieving a Level 5 qualification – and the potential to achieve a Level 6 qualification - shows the difference in life opportunities that our young people have unlocked through their attendance in boarding school.

Type of qualification	Subject and grades	What next?
A-Levels	Geography – B, Business – B, Politics - B	Bachelor's degree at University – Politics
A-Levels	French – B, Maths – C, Biology – C	Continued study at the college
A-Levels	Business – A, EPQ – B, Physical Education - C	Bachelor's degree at University – Business Studies
A-Levels	Religious Studies – B, English Language – C, EPQ - C	Foundation degree at University – Nursing Associate

## Section 2: Theory of Change Improvements



Buttle UK use these results and other evaluation data to see if we are achieving our Theory of Change. The improvement of young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and increasing capacity to engage with their education, are the outcomes that we aim for through our grant-making. Grants for boarders are no different. Therefore, as well as obtaining results data, we ask parents/carers to reflect on the holistic changes they have seen as a result of boarding. These improvement scores for the 69% (N=20) who responded are outlined in the table below.

Positively, feedback from parents and carers suggests that their child's wellbeing had improved considerably over time. Physical health, empathy and self-confidence were reported to have improved 95%, 89% and 85% respectively. Qualitative feedback highlighted the kind, thoughtful and self-assured behaviours that the young person had developed over their time at boarding school. Relationships with family, reduced aggression and improved behaviour all round were also positively impacted, with fewer arguments and a calmer home environment. Some of the highest improvement scores were notably in the areas of academic performance and more importantly, school enjoyment. At 94% and 93% respectively, it is wonderful to see that the opportunity to go to boarding school has made such an impact on their mindset around schooling and achievement.

Category	% improvement
<b>Education</b>	
Academic performance	94%
School enjoyment	93%

Access to extra-curricular	86%
Behaviour to peers	83%
Behaviour in class	83%
<b>Family</b>	
Parent personal time	89%
Parent confidence	80%
Family relationships	80%
Parent affection	78%
Parent coping	76%
Parent frustration	75%
Parent stress	63%
Parent happiness	62%
<b>Wellbeing</b>	
Physical health	95%
Empathy	89%
Self-confidence	85%
Behaviour at home	83%
Unhappiness/anxiety	63%
Friendships	61%
Withdrawal	50%

The end of their time in boarding school was not without difficulty. The average rating for how withdrawn they were, and the quality of their friendships, showed lower levels of improvement. While still representing an increase, written feedback attributed some of this to the challenges of COVID-19 around isolation and social withdrawal. Correspondingly, the improvements to parents' ability to cope were also lowest regarding stress levels and happiness. Qualitative feedback indicated that there have been considerable challenges within the wider social, emotional, and economic sphere over the last two years of the pandemic that were a factor in these self-ratings. There were notable improvements in the wider aspects of parenting, particularly the confidence of parents (80% improvement score), personal time to relax (89% improvement score) and the overall capacity of parents to provide the love and care they need to (78% improvement score). This is particularly encouraging given the nature of the issues and circumstances that caused the need for boarding school outlined in the last chapter. It is clear that their child's attendance at boarding school has given parents (and carers) support and assistance to improve the family outcomes as a whole. The young people themselves were asked to share a summary of their time at boarding school at the end of the survey. The following quotes represent just some of the positive messages received.

***I'm grateful that I had a chance to go to school and not have my mum worrying about how I'm being looked after or cared for.***

***I loved the school and I've enjoyed the smaller classes. Because of this I've had a better relationship with the teachers so if I were struggling with anything I could go to them for help.***

***It has been a good experience. I enjoyed all the opportunities that I had such as sports and school trips. It was a better atmosphere***



*away from home. Lots of good new food. I don't sleep on the floor at school.*

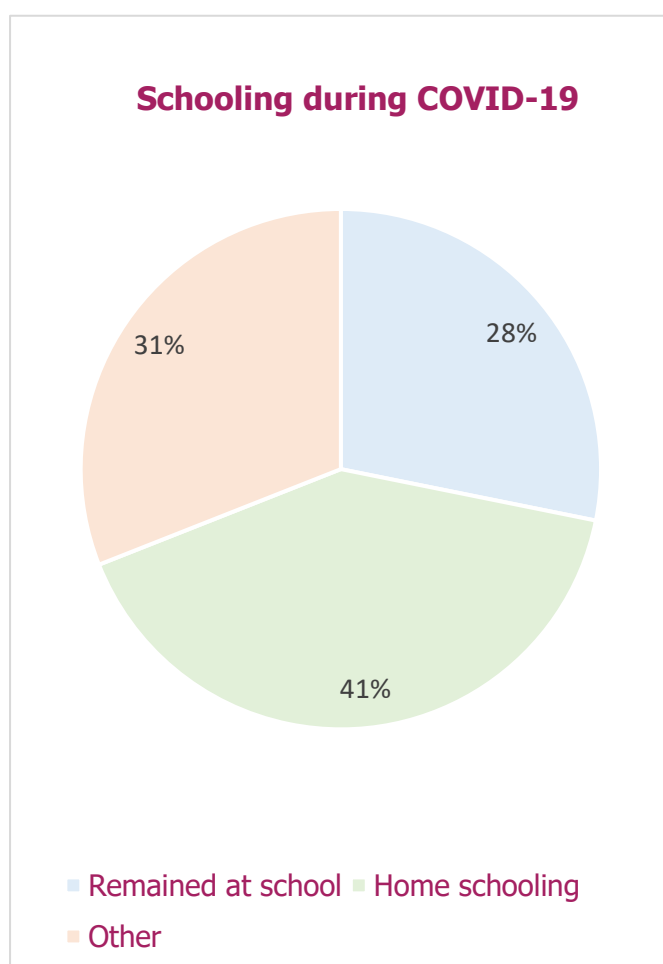
**“** *It was a big learning experience, and I was really glad to get such great GCSE results. I'm glad I experienced boarding school life. It's given me a thicker skin and prepared me for later life. There were ups and downs and times when I felt isolated and missed my family, but in the end it was generally a positive period in my life and a great opportunity I wouldn't have had in my normal life.*

**“** *I have enjoyed being the leader of the school choir and have made many friends. I loved playing netball and enjoyed the weekend socials at the boarding house.*

**“** *In my opinion, The School [anonymised] is an outstanding school as it has opened many different opportunities for me, from sports opportunities to educational opportunities...the teachers there are extremely kind as well as helpful and encouraging and motivational as they push you to always do your best and push past your limits and that to me is one of the most important qualities that need to be shown to school kids.*

## THE IMPACT OF BOARDING FOR CURRENT BOARDERS

It is very important for Buttle UK to monitor not just those leaving or starting boarding school, but to understand the ongoing experiences and changes for those in the middle of their boarding school journey. The 2020-21 academic year was a challenging time for many students and parents, given the nationwide lockdown beginning in January 2021, and a smaller lockdown in November 2020. The former lockdown forced schools to close, only opening for vulnerable students. Therefore, in our annual renewal survey – for students continuing on to the 2021-22 academic year - we asked families about their arrangements when schools closed. The responses were approximately even, with 28% of students able to stay at school due to their status as a vulnerable child. However, the largest group (41% of pupils) were home-schooled, with qualitative responses indicating that parents were largely responsible for supporting their child's education, or that there were online lessons that their child followed. Parents reported the extensive difficulties this caused, which is natural given that boarding school funding was granted on the basis that the home environment was unsuitable for the best outcomes of the child.




Parents/carers frequently referenced family illness, sibling disability, poverty, and other challenges as critical factors in children's unsuccessful engagement with home learning. Furthermore, qualitative responses indicated that children missed the social aspects of boarding, as well as opportunities to talk to staff/house parents and take part in the extensive extra-curricular activities such as sports or music. However, some positives were reported, such as time to build a relationship and enjoy time as a family. Like with those home-schooled, the majority of those who identified as 'Other' were offered digital resources to work through independently or with an adult, a full online teaching schedule or a mixture of both. However, the majority of this group reported that their child returned to boarding school early for reasons similar or the same as those outlined above; many jumped at the opportunity to get back to school as soon as possible.


Aside from the impacts of COVID-19, parents were asked to rate a variety of statements about their child's time at boarding school in the academic year 2020-21. Averages of their responses are broken down in the table below. Positively, parents felt that their child did not often misbehave in class (11%), and though the reported rate of arguments between parent and child was slightly higher (26%), parents gave a 92% rating for their and their child's

relationship. This is particularly encouraging as it demonstrates that parents still feel like they have overwhelmingly positive relationships with the child, regardless of their attendance at a school away from home. Likewise, parents felt that their child mostly enjoys their time at school (87% rating), gaining independence (83%) and achieving well too (85%). On the whole, feedback and ratings from parents and carers about their children demonstrates that boarding school is contributing to positive development both inside and outside the home, and in many different ways for their individual children.

Statement rated by parents/carers	Average rating
My child and I have a good relationship	92%
My child enjoys their time at school	87%
My child achieves well in school	85%
My child is able to do things independently	83%
The family get along well when all together	76%
We do things and create memories together as a family	70%
My child often engages in extracurricular activities	69%
My child has a good relationship with their sibling/s	69%
My child is confident	62%
My child and their sibling/s often have arguments	40%
My child and I often have arguments	26%
My child often misbehaves in class	11%

Parents themselves were asked to rate improvements in their own wellbeing and coping in the last year of their child boarding. There were several responses indicating that some felt they had suffered a decline this year, particularly in their stress levels and personal happiness, but the majority of respondents still indicated a small improvement. The improvement scores in the chart below demonstrate that parents and carers felt the greatest improvement was in their ability to manage their frustrations and to provide affection to their child, both representing a positive change. Qualitative responses supported this; some parents shared the difficulties that had caused decreases in their wellbeing, which centred around extra strain caused by COVID-19, their child's changes coming with age and other factors outside the home. However, the vast majority cited boarding school as the factor in helping them to overcome these.

 ***My [child] know she's much loved by her family, and knows she is where she is due to my health and for her own good. We both love the opportunity given save a few challenges.***

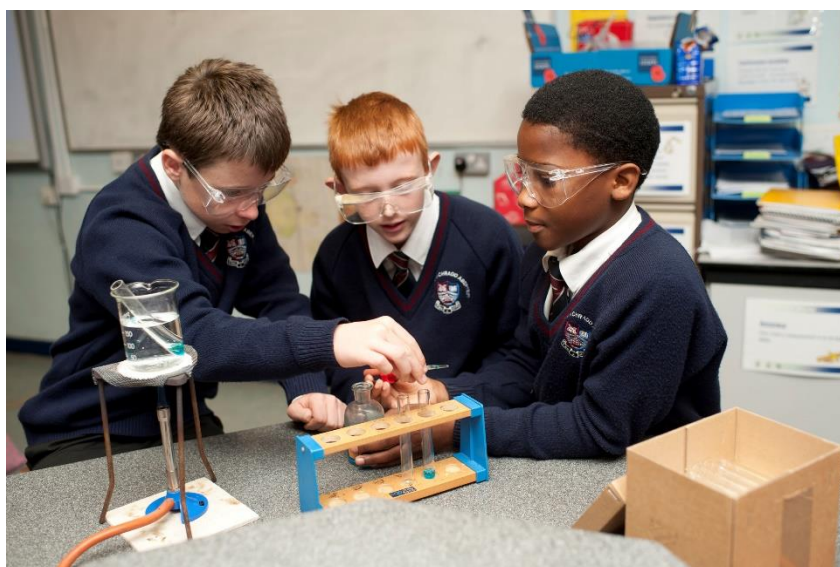
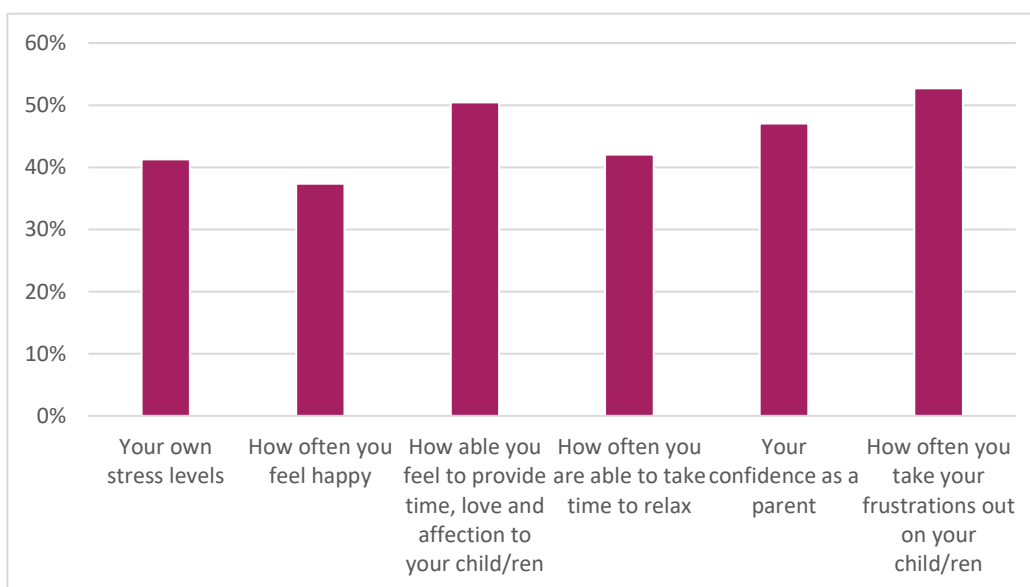
 ***This really is important to our family's life as [child] has so much potential and with the disabilities of her brother, having her at home is not an option for her to succeed.***

**“The family circumstances are still the same, however the mood has dramatically improved compare[d] to previous years.**

**“Last year and the beginning of this year was a bit of a challenge for us. But we are grateful to still be here and things are beginning to settle down now. I don't know how we would have coped without your help and support. We are very grateful**

**“Since [child] started boarding last year it has made it possible for me to be able to control my health issues better.**

### Parental wellbeing – improvement scores



## LIFE AS A BOARDER

It is fitting to end this report with the findings of a critical aspect of Buttle UK's work on seeking, understanding and improving the experiences of young people at boarding school. As part of our commitment to collaborate and involve the voice of the grantees we support, young people in Years 7-10 were invited to take part in a piece of qualitative research about their life in boarding school.


This year, we had two aims; firstly, to gain a deep understanding of their lived experiences inside of school, outside of school and the relationship between the two. Secondly, we wanted to build on what is being undertaken in our strategic work; namely, what we can and should do better to involve young people with Buttle UK to improve our work and its outcomes.


After an invitation to participate, a total of 21 students, aged between 11 and 15, agreed to take part; five completed their responses in writing and 16 consented to being interviewed via phone call or video chat. This piece of research provided an insight into the interesting, unique and reflective perspectives that boarding grantees have on life. Furthermore, we are committed to transparency and authenticity in reporting responses, which means we heard the good and the bad. The broad questions are summarised in the following headings, but due to the active and responsive nature of the research, some answers developed organically.

### What was it like preparing to go to boarding school?

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the students referenced nerves, from feeling slightly nervous to powerful anxiety. This did not follow a pattern of age or maturity, but was more prevalent where attachment was very strong with the parent/s at home. Much of the language used was themed around emotions, with a very mixed bag of sadness, excitement, fear, confusion, happiness and worry. Positively, the pupils were very keen to clarify that these nerves and periods of homesickness were quick to fade, with many referencing new friendships, exciting opportunities and school support in helping them to find their feet.

Few pupils referenced the specific adversities that had led them to a boarding grant; this could be a reflection on their awareness around the home circumstances and their age, or simply a sense of privacy. Those that did talk about trauma and difficulty at home referenced conflicting feelings of relief and concern when they found out they were going away, particularly feeling unsure of how the non-coping parent might react.

 *I was quite daunted at first because I thought I was going to feel quite homesick. But we knew it was to keep away from our mum and we wouldn't have to worry if she was drinking and I wouldn't have to live in chaos.*

 *I wasn't enjoying my old school, and I wanted to give my mum space so she can get work, so I was happy to be going*



***“ At first I was not ready, I was living in a small flat with my dad and to go over 2 hours to a place that I might stay at for the next 5 years was quite overwhelming. I begged my dad to promise to pick me up first thing Friday after school and take me home for the weekend. But you won't believe how happy I was to go back!***

***“ I kind of thought it would be the best place for me with the most opportunities for future life. First couple days I felt a bit homesick but by the end of the week I was socializing and getting good grades and just focusing on my work, sometimes I forgot about home life entirely***

***“ I was confused and excited, there wasn't really a conversation about it, I hoped to better my education.***

### **What is your experience of living at school?**

Many students were very keen to share the details of life at school. Many positive themes emerged, such as a sense of great fun in living with friends, enjoyment of the dormitories and shared living spaces, not having to travel as far as before, and even references to a sense of safety. The latter underpinned a wider theme of the security that boarding school provided for many of the pupils, with some referencing the routine and organisation as a positive part of their experience. This could be attributed as a response to the chaos they may have experienced before.

***“ It's actually quite good because it makes it a lot easier to do prep...it just keeps me in a good work environment***

***“ I think boarding feels like a safe space and everything like that. I'm okay at home and everything like that now. But I mean, it just feels like a safe space***

***“ I really like to be at school actually. You know, I have all my friends there. And I have teachers there, I can always ask them straight away, you know? It's just everything's kind of in one place, I guess. So it's just easy to like navigate. That's good***

***“ Boarding school has allowed me to schedule myself really well, though sometimes it doesn't give me time to talk to my friends and family at home.***

Few young people mentioned negatives about the physical environment itself, though there were fierce divides across interviews regarding the food provision. Friendships were strongly

linked to answers around the experience of living at school; the interviewees rarely referenced one without the other, demonstrating the importance of the relationships gained at boarding school. Many students made links between their wellbeing, where they lived and their support network at boarding school. It was clear that there was a shared experience of intensity, in a positive sense, in peer relationships at school which resulted in peers feeling like family. However, where there were mentions of conflict, these appeared worsened due to the close proximity and the nature of living with others. Some used words such as 'no space', 'no escape', 'never alone' in a negative context, demonstrating that while mainly positive, the typical difficulties of being a young person learning to handle relationships were sometimes magnified by boarding.

***“ I never had many friends at home, or much to do, compared to today. I hadn't done much, and although I didn't want to be in boarding at first, I found it more entertaining than at home***

***“ Being with your friends is good, not coming home and having no friends around there, being alone***

***“ We go into each other's dorms before lights out and communicate and socialize instead of going on our phones and stuff, which I think is probably good***

***“ As I know is natural, I didn't get along with everyone and had arguments and fights for the stupidest reason, I stole sweets, I didn't share, I was anti-social, but what could you expect from me going into and out of my comfort zone***

***“ I feel like when I say if we have a joke that goes too far, you can't really leave the jokes behind like when you go home. So I feel like I don't have as much personal space***

## **How are your relationships with peers?**

A reflective theme that stood out from the interviews was a mixed sense of both community and otherness. Many talked about the interesting lives of their peers at boarding school, referencing the different life circumstances from their own without judgment or jealousy. Pupils particularly liked living and knowing children from other countries and cultures. However, some felt that they were not represented amongst their peers due to their race or their lived experiences, expressing relief when they found somebody 'like themselves'. Others appeared to suggest they hid their backgrounds, being unwilling to show what kind of circumstances they had gone through and what their home life was like. This shows the work that is to be done by the school or by Buttle UK in addressing and mitigating a sense of otherness, to ensure students feel accepted.

***“ I found it quite interesting getting to know everyone from different countries and soon found out that this was a quite Spanish dominated boarding house.***

***“ One of my favourite parts about the school, every day you see someone from a different part of the world, there’s especially a lot of Nepalese people***

***“ It’s interesting. Like loads of people from different places you get to hear about, how they grew up, how they live. You just hear about different experiences. So your views aren’t narrow minded, I guess***

***“ Because I’m living at school I’ve discovered people’s backgrounds, such as one girl who struggled to deal with alcoholism in their family, like me***

***“ I get worried because most of the time there’s someone in my dorm who can listen to my conversations about my home, which is awkward because it’s different***

***“ There’s not much diversity in the school, I was the only black kid when I was in the lower school and then I’m the only one in my year which is slightly isolating...but it’s better now with [friend], who I can talk to about it***

## **What is it like living away from home?**

Given the strong responses regarding the nerves and fear about boarding school before attending, it is natural to expect some antipathy about living away from home. However, the themes that could be drawn from responses were complicated, with many layers that showed each individual’s unique reaction to it. Some referenced a pervasive sense of homesickness, but usually cited their access to phone calls being good enough to mitigate the distance, particularly with flexibility to return home at the weekends. It is encouraging to hear that the vast majority of pupils felt that their attendance at boarding school had aided them in developing positive strategies, connections and interactions with their family. This predominantly appeared to be due to distance creating space and time away from frustrations, and the increased appreciation for one another when together again.

***“ I feel like we always used to be each other’s like throats all the time. Giving each other more personal space has been much better. Yeah, we’re good!***

***“ My relationships with my family have got so much better since coming here, I miss everyone but I’m still in contact.***

***“Honestly, I think not being at home has kind of helped me more because I have a lot of siblings. And when we were all going to the same school and all constantly with each other, we were always clashing, always arguing. But now that we spend time away and see each other less, we get along more.*”**

***“There’s no space for disagreements, it’s just kind of like “oh my god, how have you been? What have you done this week?” which is lovely. Seeing my mum is a privilege now.*”**

***“It’s quite difficult because I was always used to staying at home and seeing my mum and my family. But I’ve kind of adapted to it. I ring my mum every single day when I can.*”**

A surprising number showed a deep maturity in understanding how their absence from home might make it easier for those remaining behind. This hinted at, more than at any other time in the research, an understanding of the tensions and adversities they had experienced. The emotions they linked to this were mixed, with some expressing sadness, resignation and indifference. A small number used language that appeared to invalidate their own feelings of homesickness or longing because they justified it by referencing the needs of the family. It may be that these individuals would perhaps benefit from additional counselling support and meaningful preparatory conversations before attending boarding school, which is something Buttle UK aims to facilitate going forwards.

***“It’s given my mum more time and energy to spend on herself instead of just spending it on me or my brother.*”**

***“Oh, I miss my family quite a lot but it definitely helps them out because my granddad was quite ill quite a lot of the time and probably puts a lot of stress on him when I’m here. So I think I miss my family, but it’s good for them as well.*”**

***“I was worried about feeling homesick but it was mainly to do with our mum and I thought it might make our mum better as she said it could be a new opportunity for her to get better.*”**

## **What does an average day at school look like?**

Every interviewee showed a strong awareness of the types of opportunities and facilities that they had at boarding school compared to previous schools they had attended, and this pervaded their answers about an average day at school. Few spoke about the lessons or the subjects without prompting. That being said, apart from explaining their own natural dislikes for certain subjects, the average learning in a day appeared to be fulfilling for students.

References to the adults – teachers, support staff, house parents – were overwhelmingly positive. When asked about their days at school, the vast majority of boarders were eager to

talk about the extra-curricular lessons and clubs that they enjoyed the most. This demonstrates the types of opportunities that mean the most to our boarders; what they chose to talk about reveals their internal dialogue around what is important to them. This is hugely positive, as it establishes that many of the experiences they value most are those that they would only be likely to get regularly from attending boarding school. Examples include horse-riding, kayaking, rambling, climbing, farming, swimming, and rearing animals. It was wonderful to hear their delight and excitement to describe the opportunities they had, often linked with positive language such as 'amazing', 'fun', 'favourite' and 'cool'. However, a good number of students found the school day to be a little intense, referring to the length of the day and the huge variety of activities as being overwhelming.

***“ Well, teachers help with a lot of things and they help you with anything, they teach you how to do stuff. If there's any problems, you can always just go to them about anything. And they're very nice. So they always listen.***

***“ There's always an activity you can do, always a basketball court or a football pitch, always something you can do, especially after school.***

***“ There's a bunch of different kinds of clubs, there's an art club and I'm a majorly arty person so I love it, there's a cooking club which is just kind of chaos because it's with one of the best teachers!***

***“ After school instead of hanging out with your friends you can go to like co-curricular clubs like gym or climbing, sometimes kayaking, which is my favourite. I still try to go to swimming, I didn't have any of that at our old school so it's obviously better education.***

***“ Sometimes the boarders are forced to do like 6 clubs a week and people don't want to do that because you've got so much homework and also, just being at the age we are, everyone is always tired.***

***“ The days are quite long, we go from 9:30-6 which is quite a long time...so I've constricted most of my clubs to lunch times so in the evenings I can just chill.***

## **What do you notice about your wellbeing?**

Talking about wellbeing was something our interviewees found quite difficult. A good number could not provide an answer or felt 'the same' as before they started boarding school. Naturally, difficult elements of schooling that are universal to most young people were referenced; some found homework stressful, and choosing GCSEs was referenced as something causing anxiety. Some of the more introspective answers came from older pupils who demonstrated the increased maturity and self-expression that develops with age.



Responses showed that many had felt their wellbeing had improved since starting boarding school. Themes in their answers included removal from the stressful relationships experienced at home, as well as the positives of being around friends.

***“I’m much happier...I mean life at home wasn’t and isn’t very easy, my grandma gets a bit grumpy so yeah. It lifts a lot of stress as well.***

***“My brother sometimes can be challenging. So having a break from him is sometimes very nice and very good. He is sometimes just a little too daring. Challenging.***

***“[Boarding school] makes me happy way more, way less stressed, I don’t really get angry anymore, it’s definitely increased my confidence.***

***“I feel...less stressed, generally happy, more confident...because of access to all the activities, being around a lot of people, always someone I can contact if I have a problem.***

***“Many times in the start I was more scared and unsettled in boarding...I realised that I need to stop worrying about the stuff I can’t control...I feel I am rather more confident than before and freely roam the house getting involved!***

What stood out is the importance of the supportive network and helpful adults that boarding school provided. Many referenced their house parents and counsellors as having given them strategies and the tools to grow into a more mentally healthy, mature young person. This is hugely important, given the trauma they are likely be recovering from. Furthermore, this appeared to offer alleviation from the initial fears and worries that most interviewees expressed regarding their feelings of leaving the family home support network before attending boarding school.

***“There’s always a staff member, as I said earlier, there’s always someone to help and you’re like it’s just such a lovely place to be and your mental health just I feel like just goes up.***

***“[House parent] is absolutely brilliant and lovely, she’ll sit and talk to you for ages, so I’ve got the support and the sense of community and people I can talk to all the time. That’s good for confidence too***

***“I feel like I get a lot of help from my house parents and the matron, and the counsellor, she’s really helpful. I think I’ve grown up, like mentally I’ve grown up, I’ve literally learnt so many things and I’ve grown up from a child to an adult***

## What would your life be like now if you didn't go to boarding school?

Overall, young people were very positive about their opportunity to attend boarding school. This was reflected most of all when asked to imagine their life if they hadn't been able to attend. Many felt that they would not have the same motivation or ability to achieve the same academic success. They reflected on the routine and structure of school giving them a purpose and capacity to focus on their learning. Others talked about plans and dreams for the future, something they didn't feel had been possible before they received a boarding grant. Themes of hope, self-improvement and relief could be drawn out from the thoughtful answers students gave, with most agreeing that they didn't think life would be as good if they hadn't been able to attend boarding school. Many boarders felt that the friendships they had formed and the improvements to relationships with their families were positive outcomes from their time in school, demonstrating the supportive and reliable networks they had developed.

***“ I know I'll get a good education from it, so I will be able to help my family in the future.***

***“ I wouldn't be bothered or I wouldn't put effort into my GCSEs or important things.***

***“ In my old school I used to concentrate less because I was thinking about going home, and I wasn't really focused on what was happening in the lessons, now I have more time and energy during lessons and during the school day.***

***“ I probably wouldn't be as well educated as I am here because the local schools around here aren't the best... I definitely wouldn't have enjoyed the school as much either***

***“ I think my life would be less interesting and fun and I would be less smart from the lessons because of the teachers, and they have amazing experience and including all the other opportunities.***



## CLOSING REMARKS

It is clear from the experiences of the families, children and young people just how many adversities our grantees face, and the significant impact these difficulties have. Our students are also living through the complexities caused by COVID-19, in a time of national crisis. In these circumstances, it is more uplifting than ever to hear the difference that boarding provision has made. The academic achievements of these students demonstrate grades that are above the national average, with all exam finishers continuing on to further or higher education. Students spoke highly of the boarding environment, describing excellent support, facilities and opportunities. This is reflected in the positive improvements parents and carers report in their children's confidence, empathy, physical health, engagement with education and overall wellbeing. Parents and carers also provided feedback on the positive changes to their own wellbeing, family relationships and their capacity to provide care. This demonstrates the wider and more holistic benefits of a grant for boarding.

Speaking directly to young people provided an opportunity to better understand how the aims of our Theory of Change and translate into their lived experiences. The direct feedback expressed in interviews demonstrates that for young people, building support networks means making and sustaining strong friendships, as well as having daily access to qualified supportive staff. Growing up in a safe and nurturing place was expressed as having access to fantastic learning environments with high quality resources and opportunities, but also having regular access to both their families and the place they call home. Their insights have also given Buttle UK some points for consideration. We will look at how we can do more to prepare young people for their start at boarding school by establishing a way to better communicate how it will be, perhaps through peers who have done it before them. We see that the lived experiences of each grantee – both before and during boarding – is unique, with a real need to reflect this complexity in the way we assess and engage with future boarders.

We would like to express our gratitude to the parents, carers and especially the young people who contributed to this report. Without their insights and responses to surveys, we would not be able to understand the difference that the Boarding Chances for Children programme made in 2020-21. We look forward to finding out how the programme continues to make impact, especially as we act on changes to suggestions made above alongside reforms that are currently underway of the boarding application process. Finally, we wish to thank all of those that have made generous donations to Buttle UK through our fundraising activities, and those in particular whose funding has been dedicated to our Support for Boarding grants in the last year.



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