

# Boarding Chances for Children 2023-2024

# Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2024 Finishing Cohort.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Results.....	4
Impact.....	5
<b>Continuing Cohort – 2023-24.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Overview.....	8
Wellbeing - Strengths and Difficulties.....	12
<b>The Borders on Boarding.....</b>	<b>14</b>
Ratings questions.....	14
Reflecting on change.....	16
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>17</b>

# Introduction

At Buttle UK, we have been providing Support for Boarding grants for over 70 years. These are an annual commitment towards school fees for secondary education and sometimes further education in exceptional circumstances. We reserve these grants for families going through challenging circumstances which has a detrimental impact on the child's wellbeing, development, and education, which is unlikely to be resolved without significant intervention.

These grants are for more than just education. They offer children a home-from-home to thrive, with pastoral staff, activities and opportunities to support their wellbeing. They also support parents and carers by giving them space to cope and recover or adapt. Above all, Support for Boarding grants allow us to deliver support that aligns with our Theory of Change, for children who are the most vulnerable.



**£729,793**

of funding for the Support for Boarding programme in the 2023-24 financial year



**55**

students supported to attend boarding provision in the 2023-24 academic year



**15**

young people completed GCSEs, A-Levels and vocational courses in Summer 2024



**£14,000**

average spend per pupil in 2023-24

# 2024 Finishing Cohort

## Results

We are keen to understand the role that our grants have in supporting emotional wellbeing, aspiration and education, as well as opportunities for better long-term prospects. Therefore, every year we gather the GCSE and A-Level results of boarders finishing their secondary or further education, as well as information about our grantees' next steps. We also collect measures of the difference that the grant has made to overall household wellbeing and relationships over time.

In Summer 2024, 14 students finished their GCSEs, and one finished their A-Levels. Four of the GCSE finishers are being part-funded by Buttle UK to continue onto sixth form to undertake further education. We received results for 10 of these students and are proud to outline their fantastic achievements here. On average, students took 8 GCSEs each, and they passed 88% of all qualifications taken; this is above the national average, as are their results themselves.

Subject and grades	National Average	2024 Buttle UK GCSE Cohort
Maths, Grade 4 and above	59.6%	89%
Maths, Grade 7 and above	16.7%	33%
English, Grade 4 and above	61.6%	100%
English, Grade 7 and above	15.6%	44%
All subjects, Grade 4 and above	67.6%	88%

2024 was nationally reported as a year of particular challenge across all GCSE results. For our cohort, this is compounded by their not only being part of the COVID-19 generation, but the extremely challenging circumstances that warranted their grant. These include many Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which cause serious barriers to education and wellbeing. Therefore, seeing how our cohort has bucked this trend is a good indicator of the quality of education that these students are receiving, the pastoral support available in their schools, and the role of boarding as a tool for change.

These students took diverse subjects, some of which are not typically available in state schools, including qualifications in Russian, Agriculture, Engineering, and Latin. Two students achieved grades 7-9 in all GCSEs they took, which is an outstanding achievement. Similarly, our only A-Level student finishing this year achieved A-B-B in their subjects. However, we acknowledge and celebrate the achievement of so many in passing so many of their qualifications. For some, this simply might not have been possible without their boarding placement.

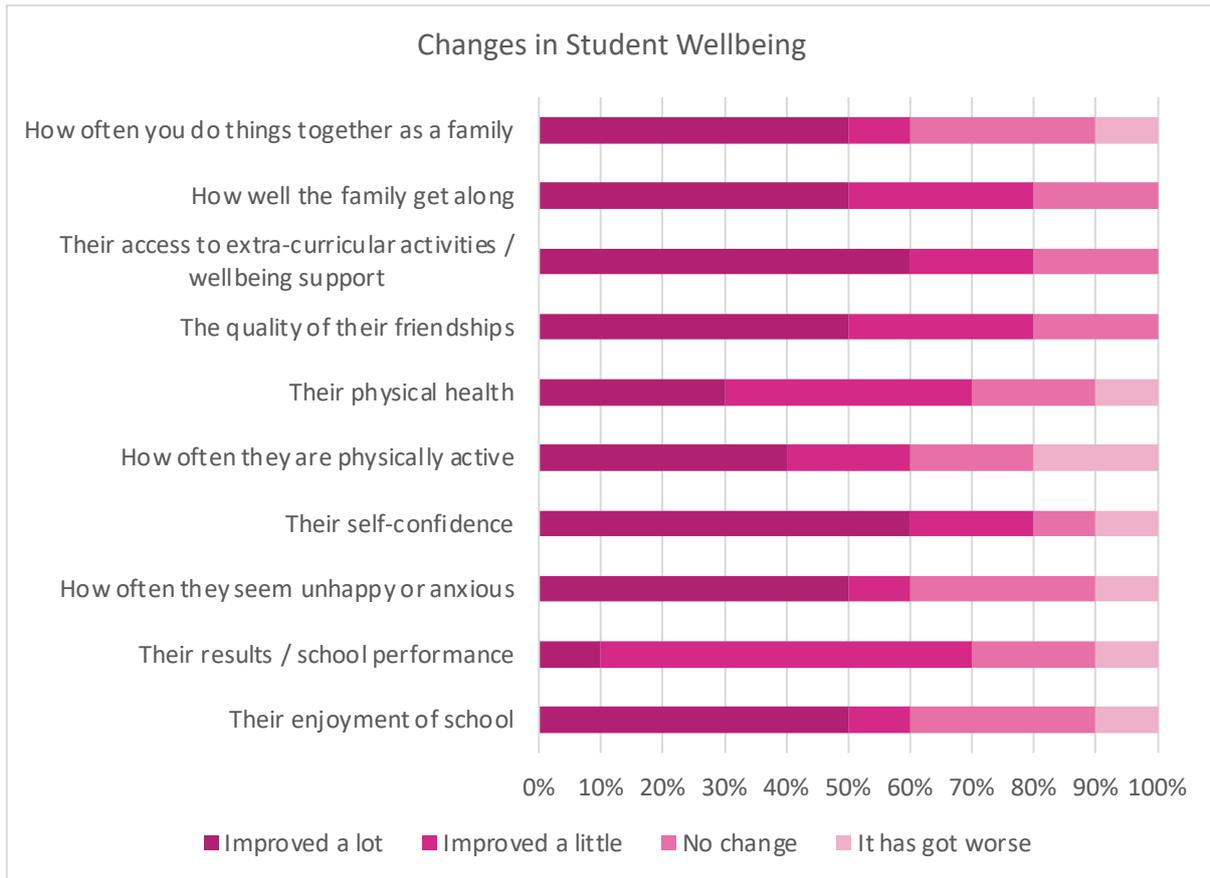
All of the finishers are continuing with education, as follows:

- Eight of these students are continuing on to A-Level study in diverse subjects such as Physics, English, Politics, Law, Latin, and History of Art.
- The A-Level finisher is heading to a Russell Group university to study a Master's degree in Civil Engineering.
- One student is retaking their GCSEs, due to acute mental health difficulties in their final year of school.

# Impact

## Impact for Finishers

Given the adversities and challenges our grantees face, it is really important that their boarding placement supports their wellbeing over time. Boarding grants are typically provided for around five years, though they can extend up to seven years. We invest time in ensuring that our school partnerships are with providers who can deliver the holistic pastoral care that is needed, as well as diverse extra-curricular activities. The results of this are evident in the chart below.



This is a small cohort of respondents, which is challenging when it comes to drawing wider conclusions on the impacts of the boarding programme on the whole, but they do largely align with prior cohorts. Overall, the results are largely positive. Some of the clearest improvements are related to social wellbeing. Family relationships and quality friendships were rated as improving for 80% of families, along with self-confidence. Access to activities also saw 60% of respondents rate it as improving a lot, which reflects the multiple opportunities for sport, art and social activities that boarding schools offer.

A lower proportion reported improvements in the enjoyment of school (60%). This is interesting, as it does not align with the largely very positive written comments. Only 10% indicated that it has got actively worse. Gains in attainment were also slightly slower; only one respondent told us that their child's results had improved a lot, though 70% overall rated some improvement. Across all categories, we saw a fairly consistent proportion of respondents rate that there was no change. One of the major challenges with reporting for these students is that they are one of the cohorts who have been most impacted by the pandemic, both in terms of the school closures and the resulting impacts on mental health.

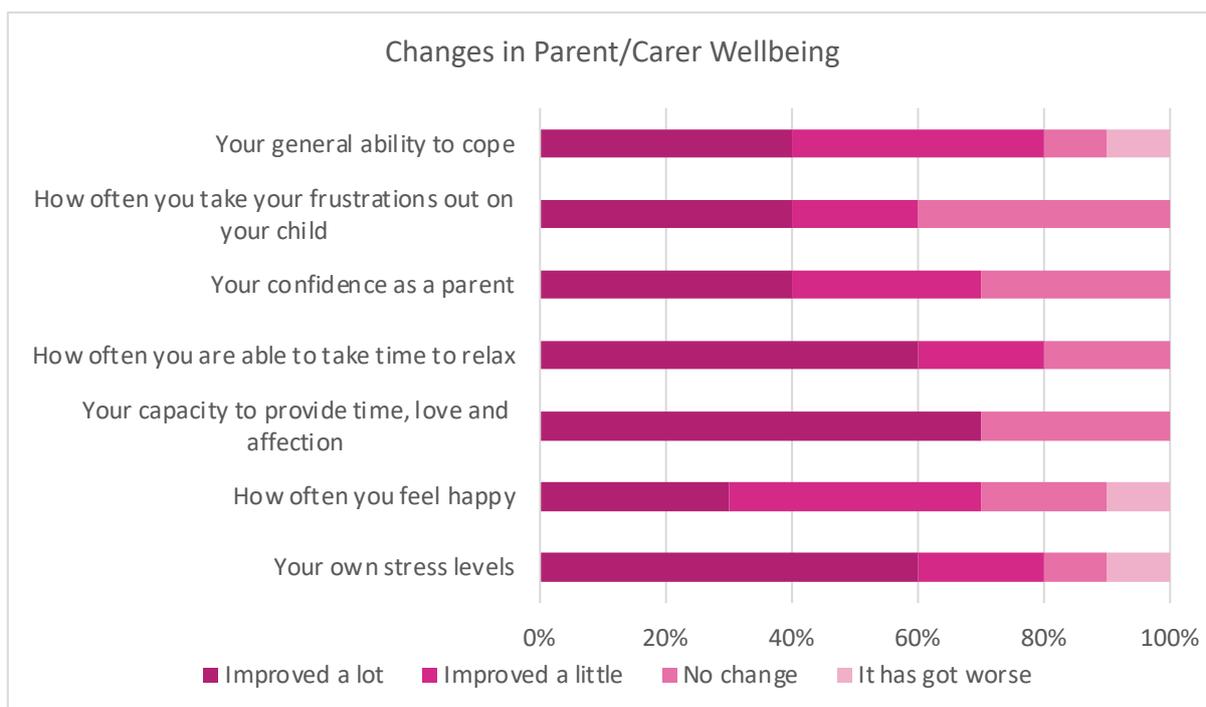
Written feedback directly from young people helped to highlight the strengths and changes that they felt their placement had supported:

- “ I really enjoyed my time at [school]. I made good friends there and will miss it a lot**
- “ Throughout my time at [school], I have enjoyed every moment I spent there. I think boarding has massively increased my punctuality, and all round helped me to become a better person at school**
- “ My time in school has been wonderful. There is a perfect learning environment with teachers always engaging with students. There is also a lot of students who are friendly**
- “ I have enjoyed my time at boarding school. It has allowed me to do much more sport and socialise with my peers. My schoolwork has been very good as during prep a teacher is always on hand to help if needed. I have made friends who I continue to see during the holidays and go for sleepovers also**
- “ I loved my school and I really enjoyed boarding. Boarding made going to school much easier too. I was taught very well there and the people are very kind**

One family did not have a positive end to their child's time in boarding school; they were the respondent reporting that things had got worse, across all categories. Though they had positive feedback for Buttle UK itself, particularly where flexibility had been arranged in their child's grant, they also shared comments regarding the school's lack of support for their child's needs. This had led to the breakdown of relations between the family and the school. We take this sort of feedback very seriously, and encourage dialogue between families and schools to prevent this from happening.



## Impact for Parents/Carers



We also ask parents and carers about the impact that they have experienced as a result of the grant. Boarding placements are typically offered to children and young people whose home environment is extremely challenging. Most parents and carers' capacity to care for their children is depleted by factors such as physical and mental illness, acute stress, and caring responsibilities for siblings with additional needs.

Over 80% of parents and carers reported improvements in their capacity to cope, reductions in their stress, and additional time to relax. A further 70% of respondents reported improvements in their confidence as parents. These are important factors for children returning home from boarding placements, as it provides them with a more supportive environment to complement the care provided by the school.

When we asked about the role of Buttle UK in supporting the whole household, we received only positive feedback, some of which is shared here:

“

**There is nothing more Buttle could have done to improve things. Giving my son the opportunity to board was a phenomenal experience, which provided much needed structure and helped to foster greater respect for adults in authority**

“

**[Young person] has done so well interacting with everyone around her always. There was no issues ever throughout her seven years in the school**

“

**Buttle have always been extremely supportive**

# Continuing Cohort – 2023–24

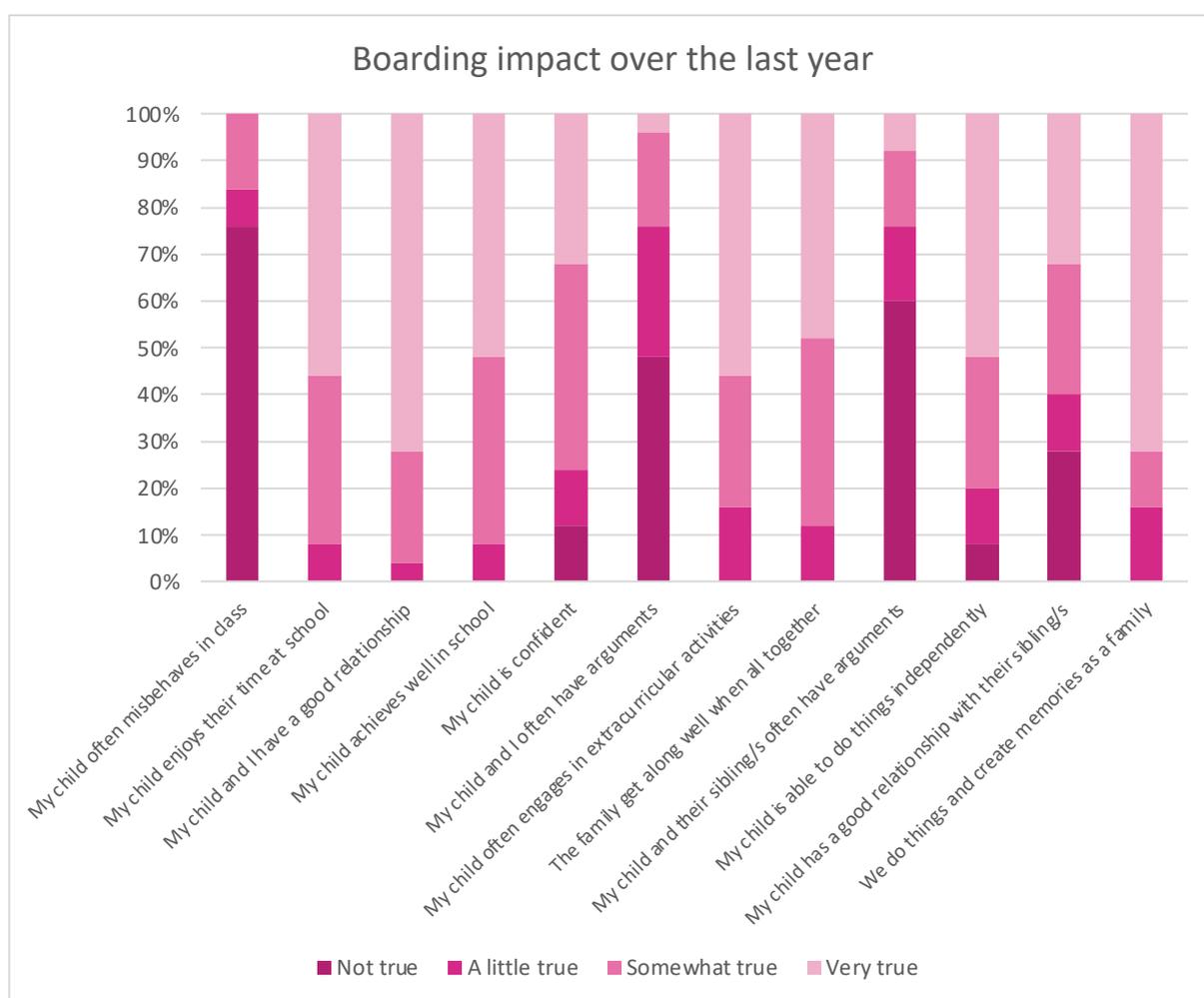


[Child] has absolutely thrived since being at [school], she is happier, more confident and is enjoying not being a full-time young carer. She has made so many friends and is engaging in so many new activities (piano, tennis, viola). She now has more time to focus on her acting and has secured big roles in the amazing school theatre plays. Her grades have all been A–C and in general it has changed her life completely! I would just like to say thank you from us both for giving [child] the chance to be a teenager and focus on herself! This opportunity to be safely away from home has changed her in the most positive ways

## Overview

In the 2023-24 academic year:

- 55 children had a boarding placement funded by Buttle UK.
- 13 of these placements were supported in our partnership with the Royal National Children’s Springboard Foundation (RNCSF)<sup>1</sup>.
- 10 children joined the programme in September 2023. One left in the Autumn term.



<sup>1</sup> Since 2021, Buttle UK has worked collaboratively with the RNCSF to provide grant contributions for vulnerable children accessing their Broadening Educational Pathways Challenge Fund. More information can be found [here](#).

Each year, we ask parents and carers to rate changes in their child's core behaviours, learning, engagement, and relationships as a result of their boarding grant. Year-on-year, we seek to understand where boarding provision has strengths, weaknesses, and areas where intervention might improve the impact. Some of the qualitative feedback highlights the transformative nature of boarding school, and the fantastic opportunities it affords young people:

“

**[Young person] entered World Scholars Competition and reached finals!**

”

**[Young person] has achieved great things in advancing her education and found some friendship groups and loves Army Cadets**

“

**I am overjoyed at how well [child] is getting on at school. She is really thriving and she is looked after and nurtured so much. We went to my family for Christmas and New Year. It was the first time we'd been in a year, and my family couldn't believe the positive differences in [child] and how much more settled and mature she has become since she started [school]**

”

**[Young person] has recently won a place on the UCL mentorship programme and was only 1 of 4 children at the school to be given this place**

This year, 100% of respondents shared that they felt they had a good relationship with their child. Almost three-quarters felt this to be very true. Similar proportions reported the same for their capacity to enjoy shared time when they were together, as well as their ability to create memories as a family. Low proportions indicated that their child frequently argued with their siblings. This is a positive indicator that boarding does not act as a barrier to family time or filial relationships. It is also indicative that the space provided by boarding provision is transformational in supporting healing and recovery, where relationships had otherwise been strained.



In terms of education and learning behaviours, parents and carers reported most positively in response to the question of their child's achievement, with 100% reporting that boarding had made an impact, with 52% reporting the highest level. A further 56% told us that it was very true that their child enjoys their time at school, and none reported that their child did not enjoy school. Written feedback raved about their child's achievements – not just in attainment, but wider hobbies and interests, and how this improves wellbeing:

“

**She is getting higher grades and just received an 83% in a Geography exam. [Young person] has been accepted to be an 'anti-bullying ambassador'**

“

**I feel it has helped her independence and she has gained new friendships. The routine has enabled [young person] to be more focused. She has taken up the violin again and I can see this is bringing her joy**

“

**At school [young person] is very happy and has settled in very well...[he] has very good grades and performance and he has become vice captain of the hockey team**

“

**He is getting top grades in all subjects. He is picking his finally GCSE subjects to study in Sept. He is due this month to take his Piano Exam & is also going on a school trip to Italy! He is really enjoying being at school with so many opportunities. He gained Student of the Year trophy for his boarding house in July last year**



Over three-quarters of respondents reported that their child does not misbehave in class, which is positive. However, looking at this conversely, 24% did report that their child misbehaves, to differing extents. Other areas of slight concern were the 12% reporting that their child was not confident, while 8% felt their child was not independent. Each child's individual challenges are followed up after this survey if there is cause for concern, to ensure their needs are met.

One of the areas of challenge for a small number of our boarders is Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and for others, mental health issues. We are pleased to report that all feedback we received indicated that families felt well supported by the schools and Buttle UK, to the greatest extent possible within the boundaries of their child's needs. This was similar with other pastoral issues such as homesickness and bullying.

“

**[Child] is supported weekly by wellbeing one-to-one sessions. He finds them supportive, and he knows he can go to learning support whenever he feels overwhelmed**

“

**[Young person] has been diagnosed with ADHD and is now on medication. The school have seen a dramatic improvement in his behaviour and time keeping. The school have been invaluable in supporting [young person] with his diagnosis**

“

**The school have been very supportive in helping her back into sport. She's had the opportunity to do some beginner's horse-riding lessons with the school and these have been hugely positive...[they] seem very therapeutic in helping her calm her mind down**

“

**[Young person] has severe anxiety and particularly social anxiety, which impacts his ability to be in the boarding house...I've been in ongoing contact with the school and the school has expressed that there is a need for additional resources for boarders who have experienced trauma as well as those who are neurodivergent**

“

**The SEN department are implementing teaching sessions designed to help her develop inference and reading comprehension. They are also introducing games sessions to develop and practise social skills. They are all very much rooting for her to do well and it really touches me how everyone comments on how kind and loving she is**



# Wellbeing – Strengths and Difficulties

As outlined elsewhere in this report, the true impact of a boarding grant is not just measured in a child's attainment. In line with our Theory of Change, we are invested in seeing change happen in children's engagement in education, relationships, and social and emotional health. This is because the circumstances that bring them to a Buttle UK grant are often devastating for their wellbeing and development. These are families that have experience of serious long-term illness, bereavements, traumatic abuse, and kinship care arrangements.

We do not rely on our own measures of improvement alone. We use the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which is an internationally recognised tool for measuring the mental health and wellbeing of children. It incorporates 25 questions, recording measures of emotions, conduct, peer relationships and hyperactivity. Parents and carers complete the SDQ on behalf of their children at three intervals:

- When a child starts their boarding placement
- Yearly, in the annual renewal survey
- At the end of a young person's time at boarding school

It has taken time to build a bank of data, which is now gaining strength through such routine measurement. The Buttle UK team use these scores as a way to frame helpful conversations and flag concerns, particularly for families or schools who have not otherwise disclosed difficulty. This supports us to help young people to thrive in their placements, as well as delivering our duty of care.

When we look at the 2023-24 student cohort, we can see that our grantees experience much higher than average difficulties. Almost a fifth had an SDQ score of 20 or more, indicating that they are continuing to experience significant challenges. As expected, we supported a lower-than-average proportion of students who are reported as being close to average. When looking at the data at a granular level, many of our grantees are close to the upper limit of their bracket, too.

SDQ Score	Bandings/brackets	UK wide comparison	All grantees in the 2023-24 cohort
0-13	Close to average	80%	68%
14-16	Slightly raised	10%	11%
17-19	High	5%	4%
20-40	Very high	5%	18%

However, a key takeaway is the difference for individual pupils over time. When comparing the same measures year-on-year, over two-thirds (67%) saw a reduction in their SDQ score between 2022-23 and 2023-24. This year, three students who had previously been in the high or very high bracket fell to the lowest bracket, while another reduced to the slightly raised bracket where they had been very high in the previous year. For the remaining students for whom we did not see a fall in their SDQ, they moved only within the close to average bracket. However, we do monitor and track these changes to ensure a timely response should they raise any concerns, if they continue to climb or cross into a more serious bracket.

In 2024, we once again put the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire to students themselves, in the student survey. This is adapted to make the phrasing suitable and relatable

to young respondents. On average, students rated themselves approximately 2 points lower than their parent or carer. This demonstrates that the scores were fairly aligned, indicating that the two sets of results are comparable; this was similar last year, the first time we undertook both measures concurrently. We feel there is significant value in aligning the child's and parent's voices, as it lends weight to our impact measurements.

We are particularly interested in supporting students with extremely high SDQ scores. Three students whose parental data had placed them in a high or very high bracket rated themselves similarly. Two identified themselves as having a much lower score than their parent, whose scoring had put them in the very high bracket; they self-identified as being close to average. Being such a small cohort, it is hard to draw firm conclusions on this data.

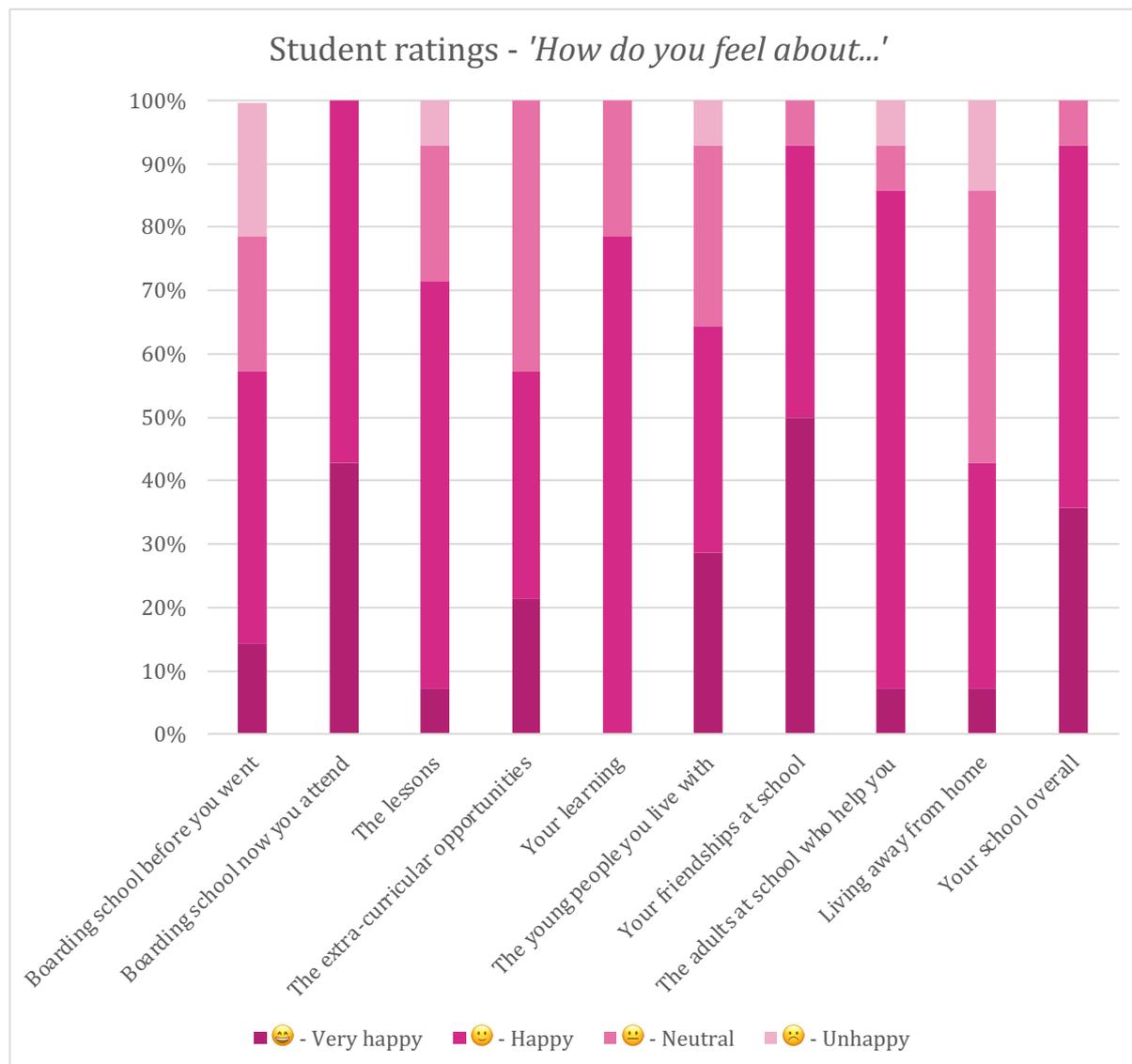
We do consider whether parents are inclined to rate their child as having a higher SDQ score as a result of concerns over whether a low score might warrant a reduction or removal of the grant. We do communicate with respondents that the results of the questions have no bearing on their child's grant, but this serves as a reminder to reiterate that point. As with all of our impact measurement, our intention is always to capture the truest representation of where a boarding grant is or isn't helping.



# The Boarders on Boarding

## Ratings questions

In Summer 2024, all boarders from the 2023-24 academic year were invited to share their thoughts and feelings on attending boarding school. We had responses from 14 young people across Years 8 to 12, with over half in Year 11. In addition to the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, we ask students a mixture of ratings and open-ended questions, with the former encouraging students to assign their feelings about a series of statements.



It is immensely encouraging to see positive ratings by most students across almost all categories. While 42% felt neutral or even unhappy prior to starting their placement, 100% expressed happiness about being at boarding school now they had started. As for the schools themselves, 36% reported that they were very happy with their school, with a further 57% telling us they were happy. Their qualitative feedback touched on multiple aspects, such as getting to learn an instrument, take part in sports clubs, or the general environment of their school and its grounds.

Friendships were seen as a large part of this positive experience. 93% of students told us that they were happy or very happy with the friendships they had at school. When we asked them about their favourite aspect of school, over half alluded to their friendships as being a major part of their enjoyment. Students talked about their peers and friends as acting like family,

helping them to feel settled and have more fun:



**A general sense of family with the other boarders**



**My friends because I don't think I would've stayed here if it wasn't for them**



**The friends you make along away, because you take that experience with you throughout your life**



**My friends, it's like a sleepover everyday**



**I get better learning and it's fun to live with people my own age**

Some respondents also told us that they liked gaining valuable life skills and routine at school, though this aspect was more divisive. 43% told us that they felt neutral about being away from home, while 14% actively reported feeling unhappy about this experience. They attribute this to factors such as homesickness, or not having much personal time or freedom. On the other hand, a number specifically expressed relief at being able to avoid the difficulties they might otherwise experience at home, telling us that they felt the routine was helpful for them:



**Being able to get to school on time and not miss as much school**



**The independence it teaches like how to wash your own clothes, using an alarm clock instead of relying on parents and other things**



**The responsibility about being away from home**



**Being away from home, I miss my mum**



**Having to interact with people all of the time and being away from my mum. I don't always love the people there as well**

When we asked students what they did not enjoy about boarding school, their responses were largely practical. A number do not enjoy the food as much as that of home, while others told us about negative elements of their experience that are highly specific, such as sharing showers, attending roll call, or the uniform they wear. On the other hand, they also raved about other school-specific aspects, telling us that particular subjects and lessons were really fun.

While a good majority reported positively on the supportive adults in their school (86% told us they were happy or very happy), one student expressed unhappiness at the level of control that house staff have. Another told us that while they did not like getting in trouble, they felt that this was a fairly normal part of the school experience. It appears that individual staff members have a significant role to play in the overall ratings we received for this question.

## Reflecting on change

Our final question asked students to describe how life might be different if they hadn't attended a boarding school. This question always provokes interesting and thoughtful responses, particularly given how challenging it is to consider how things might have been in light of how things actually are. The responses this year were mixed, with some push and pull factors. Sometimes students alluded to things they felt they had missed out on at home, while others very actively told us that they felt that school had offered them an escape from detrimental factors.

“

**[I would be] late to school again. Argue with mum more. Be more stressed in the mornings again**

“

**[I would have] more friends in my area at home**

“

**I think I wouldn't be friends with so many people. I would probably get more sleep. I wouldn't be so self-dependant. I think being self-dependant is a good attribute to have when in the real world**

Many responses focused on the academic benefits of their setting. Students reported that they felt they had higher grades as a result of attending their school, sometimes linking this to higher standards, better lessons, and stricter routines. The latter was also mentioned when it came to avoiding negative influences in their home area, particularly in how removal from their previous situation had steered them on a different path.

“

**I think academically I would be worse off, because boarding school has a deep focus, on education compared to other schools**

“

**It wouldn't be too different but I think my grades might've been lower**

“

**I probably would have been mixed up with the wrong people and I wouldn't have completed most of my work**

“

**I would probably go to my same day school and probably wouldn't have reached my full academic potential**

“

**I would probably be in trouble**

Happily, a number of students' main feedback simply expressed their happiness that they attended boarding school, reporting that they might otherwise be sad or unhappy had they not. This is so important for Buttle UK in championing boarding placements as a favourable alternative for young people otherwise living in extremely challenging circumstances.

“

**I think I would be very sad and not very happy**

“

**I wouldn't be as happy as I am**

“

**I would be sad**

# Conclusion

In our last report, we spoke about the significant financial evaluation that was undertaken, which has become a routine part of our annual renewal process. We are pleased to report that this has resulted in a more stable cohort this year, and a strong alignment between need and provision. A year on, we are continuing to put into practice the renewed criteria to ensure equity in our delivery of boarding grants. However, as with all of our practices, we tirelessly evaluate our work to identify challenges and address them comprehensively. With this in mind, we are continuing our period of reflection and review. At the time of writing, this means that we are pausing applications for the 2025-26 academic year.

Four new students started in Autumn 2024, though further offers have been made to a number of applicants. We have increased our flexibility with starting dates, which is particularly helpful for seeing potential applicants matched with settings that absolutely meet their needs. We have continued to see applications come from suitably qualified professionals (previously, applications came from families). This has given opportunities for our grants team to focus outreach on referrers approaching us for a Chances for Children grant, who have families who might benefit from a boarding grant instead.

Overall, this report outlines many causes for celebration across our boarding programme. As with all aspects of our grant-making at Buttle UK, we hope more than anything to see children thriving, not just surviving. Our Theory of Change is an important tool for reflecting on the successes we have outlined across this report. It is clear that for most grantees, they see an enormous boost in their capacity to engage in education and learning. They are cared for and supported by their settings in ways that champion their mental health and wellbeing. They take part in incredible opportunities and activities that they simply would not have access to without their grant. The data alone illuminates this, but so too do their words and stories of their lived experiences.

We could not have written this report without the helpful feedback that we received from so many parents, carers, and young people. We are so proud of our 2024 finishers for their outstanding achievements and hard work. We are equally excited to see our 2023-24 cohort continue into the current academic year; their direct feedback reminds us that they have so much resilience and drive. It is wonderful to hear from parents and carers, who tell us how transformative the grant is for their child and their household. We wish to extend our thanks to all grantees for their responses.



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