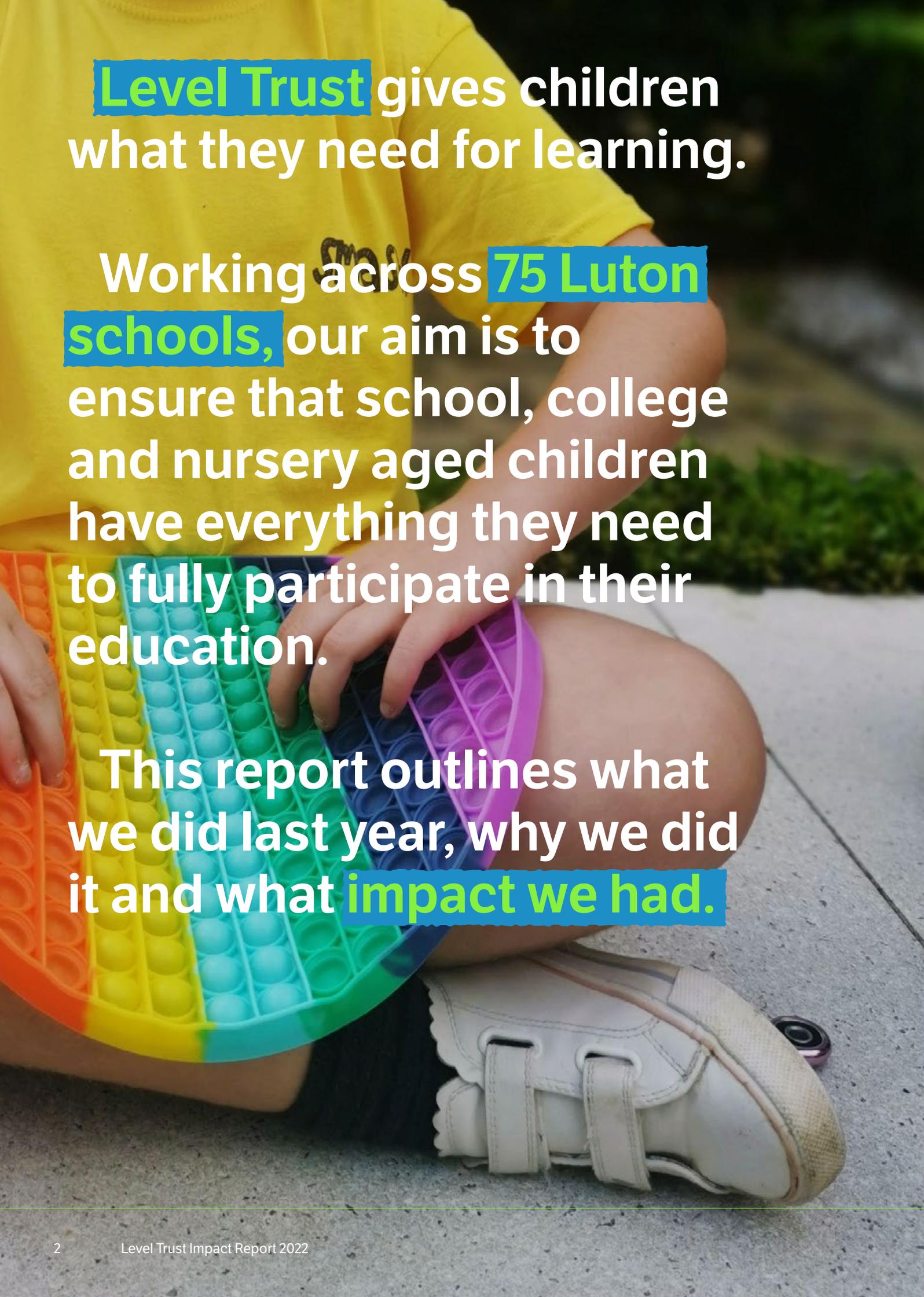


Better
lives.

Brighter

futures.



A child wearing a bright yellow t-shirt is sitting on a grey concrete sidewalk. They are holding a large, colorful pop-it toy that is divided into sections of orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The child's hands are visible, interacting with the bubbles of the toy. They are wearing white sneakers with grey laces. The background is slightly blurred, showing some greenery.

Level Trust gives children what they need for learning.

Working across **75 Luton schools**, our aim is to ensure that school, college and nursery aged children have everything they need to fully participate in their education.

This report outlines what we did last year, why we did it and what **impact we had.**

What's inside.

Level Trust	2
What we did	4
How did we listen?	7
Why children needed us	8
The impact we had	14
Children's stories	18
Who did we work with?	20
Thank you	22

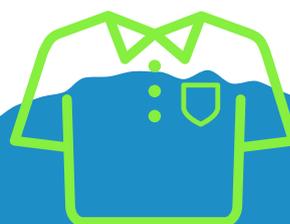
What we did.

Over 2021–22 we worked with children on **8,801** occasions, **2,800** more than the year before. We did this by providing:



408

children with a computer through our work with **Laptops4Learning**.



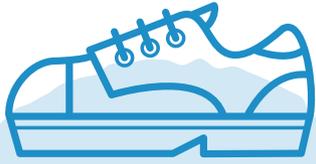
4,842

children with a total of **7,062** items of free school uniform through our **Uniform Exchange**.

SMASH

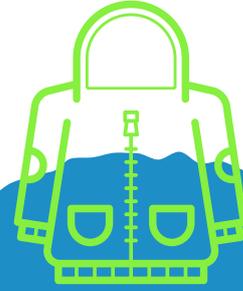
463

children with **SMASH Holiday Provision**.



456

children with **free**
school shoes.



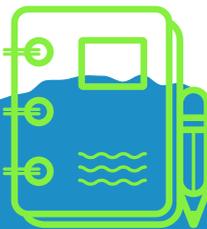
170

children with **free**
winter coats or warmth
for their homes.



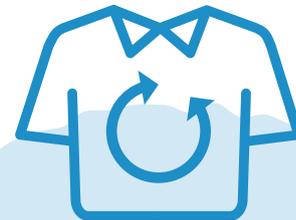
1,080

children with **presents**
at Christmas time.



1,094

children with **learning**
resources.



and by reusing school uniform
we helped Luton's children and
young people save...

30
tonnes

of CO2
equivalent



How did we **listen?**

To understand the impact our work had we:

- Talked to **463 children** who took part in our activity scheme.
- Surveyed **27 children** and **228 parents and carers** who used the Uniform Exchange.
- Ran Youth Forum sessions with **45 children** in **three schools**.
- Collected case studies and feedback from **14 school partners**.
- Recorded details of **every** Uniform Exchange order.
- Collected diversity data from **463 children** who attended our activity scheme and **228 parents and carers** who used the Uniform Exchange.

Why children **needed** us.

Children need us because families cannot afford costs associated with learning.



Almost **50%** of all children who accessed our SMASH holiday provision received **free school meals**.



(220 of 228)
of parents and carers surveyed told us that they always or sometimes **struggled** to afford the cost of school uniform **(95% last year)**.



(91 of 228)
of families told us that they had used **payday loans or credit cards** to pay for school uniform before they had known about the Uniform Exchange **(27% last year)**.

Families told us they could not afford shoes, coats, school uniform and P.E. kit because of a diverse range of factors. The two most common reasons families gave were being a single parent family or being in debt.

Reason cannot afford school uniform*	Number of families who gave this reason		
		2021–22	2020–21
Family trauma	15	7%	9%
Job loss	21	9%	2%
Long term illness or disability in the family	49	29%	16%
Low paid work	56	25%	35%
Changes in benefits	12	5%	9%
Debt	92	40%	12%
More than four children in the household	30	13%	14%
Recently arrived in the UK	17	7%	2%
Single parent	130	57%	37%
Living in temporary accommodation	32	14%	10%

Families were more likely to give two or more reasons for why they could not afford uniform. One mother told us that she had lost her job due to not being able to arrange affordable childcare for her four children before and after school. Although she was proactive in seeking help, it took weeks for her benefit payments to come through to her. She is a single parent and so she took out a high interest credit card to buy essentials for her family. Although she is now back in work, she is struggling to service her debt. She has subsequently taken out a payday loan and a large chunk of her take home pay is swallowed up paying back the debt she has built up. To make ends meet she is utilising the services of Level Trust, the Luton Foodbank and other charity partners across Luton.

*This data came from the 228 families who completed our Uniform Exchange survey.

How has the cost of living crisis impacted our families?

This year we helped 1,800 more children than we did in the previous year. Almost half of children in Luton now live in poverty. Living in poverty can mean a child is living in a cold home, going hungry, or making do without everyday essentials.

Children in the most vulnerable and precarious circumstances will be among those most exposed to the cost of living crisis. Families with nothing left to cut back on are no longer having to choose between heating or eating – instead they're unable to afford either.

Growing up in poverty can harm children's life chances, limiting their opportunities, holding them back in education, or leading to worse physical and mental health outcomes.

Parents that we surveyed told us the following:

62% have been forced to cut back on food spending for their family over the past 12 months.

Almost 80% of parents said they have struggled to provide the essentials for their child's education due to the current cost of living crisis, and over a quarter (**26%**) said their child's mental health has worsened due to the situation.

Parents have told us that they have had to resort to desperate measures, with almost half (**45%**) having sold possessions, over **40%** having taken on new credit cards, extra debt or a payday loan, and several respondents told us that they have had to leave pets at rescue centres due to the rising cost of living.

In order to respond to the increased level of need, we have continued to find ways to make our work more efficient so we can grow our capacity. This has been greatly helped by the appointment of our Delivery Coordinator & Family Worker and the appointment of a Deputy CEO. We have also partnered with Laptops4Learning who have supported us with the distribution and sourcing of high-quality devices for children experiencing digital poverty.

What happens to children when their families cannot afford costs associated with learning?

Children are at risk of harm.

Across Luton, there are thousands of children living in poverty. It is possible to come through it and achieve great things. However, it's not easy. Sleeping in a cold bedroom, studying on an empty stomach or missing out on trips with friends can all have a negative impact on young people; children and young people from poor backgrounds have to fight harder for their future.

Through our Youth Forum work with children in secondary schools, we have been able to hear from children with lived experience of poverty about how growing up from a poorer background has impacted them.

"I had to get a part time job to help my mum pay bills, buy food and get other stuff for my brother and sister. Sometimes, I've been in trouble at school as I don't have the right equipment. I don't tell them that it's 'cause my mum can't afford it. That's embarrassing."

As well as some children having to work part time jobs alongside attending school, they may also struggle to buy learning materials and equipment needed for school or they may

not be able to afford to pay to go on school trips with their friends leading to a feeling of isolation and being different.

As in the previous year, the feedback we received from young people pointed very clearly to the impact that going without the things they need for learning has on their mental health. Young people told us about the worries they have when it comes to money and how feeling like you are constantly left out or 'different' has a huge impact on their sense of wellbeing.

"Some of my friends just don't bother going to school. They know they haven't got the right uniform and someone will have a go at them. It's not as if they can get their mum or dad to go and get it as it's expensive so what are they supposed to do?"

Children participate less in learning.

99 out of 228 parents surveyed said that their child had missed out on lessons because they couldn't afford to purchase the school uniform or P.E. kit required.

One parent told us:

"I feel so embarrassed that I am not able to afford to buy uniform for my daughter's first day at school. I feel like a failure. My biggest child (who is at high school) does not have the right PE kit

and so he has to miss lessons as the school does not let him do PE without the right shorts, top and whatnot.”

Without the correct equipment for school and learning, children told us they missed out on taking part in subjects that require them to purchase resources such as food technology, design technology, music and extra curricular activities. Young people also told us they miss out on exam revision because they can't afford revision guides. The most common activity we were told that children missed out on was P.E. because kits are expensive.

“At the start of the term, you are given a list of ingredients that you need when you are doing practicals. I know my mum can't afford to buy the ingredients, so I don't ask her. I wish I had never chosen to do Food Tech because every other week I just have to sit there and watch while my friends are cooking.”

— 16-year-old

Children feel worried.

37 out of 45 children surveyed said they worried about not having the right things for school and **43 out of 45** said their parents worried about it too. Young people told us that if they didn't have the right equipment or uniform, they worried about getting in trouble with teachers or being bullied for looking different.

“It's not that the teachers are unkind, it's just that they've got so much to do that when I tried to tell my form tutor why I didn't have the right things, I could see he was busy and not really listening. I just stopped talking. I got a detention later on the same day for not having a calculator in maths.”



The **impact** we had.

Children's basic needs were met.

Over the year, we gave Luton children **7,062** items of school uniform, **456** pairs of school shoes, **170** winter coats, **1,094** sets of learning resources and **408** computers.

100% of schools surveyed said our work met children's basic needs for warm and waterproof clothing and were positive about the support that Level Trust had been able to provide their children in levelling the educational playing field.

"The support we have received from Level Trust at Waulud Primary School has made a huge impact on our families since we began our partnership. The vouchers for shoes, uniform and coats have been invaluable to our families enabling children to come into school in the correct & warm

clothes required. SMASH has been a wonderful opportunity for so many children offering a fun and safe environment during the holidays. Children said that they loved SMASH and it meant they were able to get out of the house and do something fun.

The donations of Chromebooks have made such a difference to children in supporting their learning. The staff at Level Trust are helpful, kind and always go above and beyond with their support. We can't express our gratitude to Level Trust enough. Thank you to all."

228 out of 228 parents who answered our survey question told us they would use the money they saved through using Level Trust to help them pay for more essential items for their children and families. This included food, school trips, clothing, household bills and paying off debts.

“It’s a big help. I’ve saved hundreds of pounds by not having to buy my son a new high school uniform and computer. I can use the money for all the bills I’ve got coming in.”

— Mother using the Uniform Exchange

“To know that I can go and do a decent supermarket shop now I haven’t had to worry about buying uniform has been a godsend.”

— Parent talking to a Level Trust employee in a local school

“With the cost of gas and electricity going up so much, I have been able to put money on the electricity key.”

— Single mother of four children

Families also told us that using the Uniform Exchange stopped them from going into debt, stopped them struggling to afford the basics and meant they had more resources to support their children.

Children participated more in learning.

171 out of 228 (75%) children and families surveyed said that using the Uniform Exchange reduced the risk of them missing school. Children told us that they now could take part in P.E. and go to school.

“If I’ve got the right PE kit, I can join in. I love PE.”

— Primary child, age 10

Partnership working with schools is essential to ensure that we are reaching the most vulnerable children in our town. This is what schools have told us about the support Level Trust has provided.

“Level Trust has been invaluable to our families over the years. With your support, we have been able to promote the well-being of our children and reduce the financial pressures on our parents.”

— Whitefield Primary

Schools also noted that supporting children experiencing digital poverty had a positive impact on their students:

“Level Trust laptops have enabled us to ensure that some of our vulnerable and disadvantaged children who do not have access to Chromebooks at home are able to access a device. Although we adapt homework for children without access, having a Chromebook means that the children can complete their homework digitally and use a range of web-based resources that we use in school. Furthermore, the children can use their Level Trust devices in school as part of their learning in lessons too,

so that they don't have to borrow school devices. This has a very positive impact on their learning and enables them to fully access blended learning."

— Denbigh High School

Children grew in confidence.

100% of children who took part in SMASH (**463**) showed an improvement in their confidence and **20 out of 27** children surveyed said that getting school uniform from the Uniform Exchange made them feel more confident.

"Please can I come back again next year? I know I will be too old because I'll be in year 7 but I just LOVE SMASH!"

— Samaya, age 11

Children told us that they felt more confident because they looked like their classmates, could take part in lessons and could play with their friends. Children at our activity scheme said it was because they had the opportunity to try new things.

Schools also remarked on the benefits of SMASH for both parents and children.

"Our families look forward to the SMASH programme as it gives them some much needed respite and the activities are fun and engaging for the children."

Children and parents felt less worried and had a sense of pride.

Schools told us that our work helped to lift the financial burden off their families and parents told us that because of this they felt less worried.

"The team at Level Trust are so helpful. Nothing is too much trouble for them. When I first went in, I was so nervous as I'd never had to use anything like that before. They put me at ease and showed me how I could exchange my child's old uniform for new uniform. It made me feel so much better to know that I wasn't just being given a handout, but I was donating too. I don't earn very much money as I'm on a zero hours contract and earn minimum wage so Level Trust has helped me out so much."

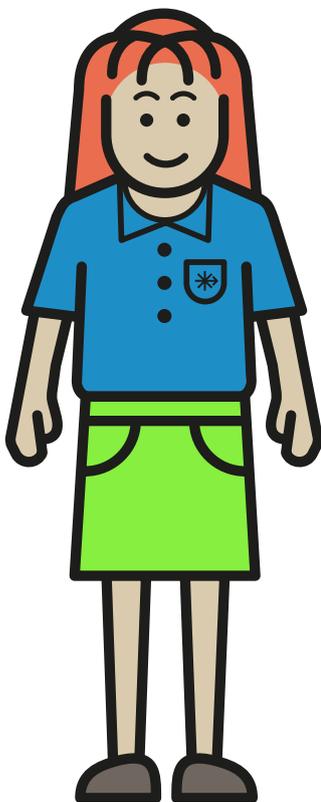
— Mother of three using the Uniform Exchange

It was notable in the feedback that children and parents had a sense of pride in using the Uniform Exchange because they could donate school uniform to help other children and support the environment at the same time.

“It’s  important
that we look
after our world
so *stopping* old
clothes  going to
landfill is a *good*
idea. There’s no
Planet B!  ”

Secondary school child, age 12

Children's Stories.



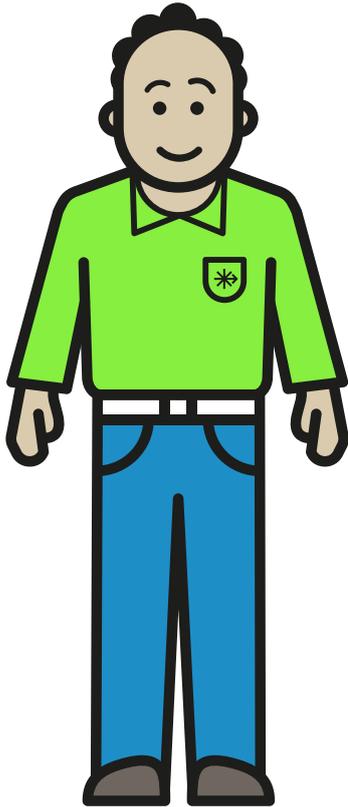
Hema*, age 9

Hema and her sister both attended SMASH for the full five weeks. They live with their family in temporary accommodation with a severe damp problem. Both sisters suffer from chronic eczema, but Hema's was more severe. Most days her arms and hands were bandaged to prevent them from becoming infected. Hema also required a dairy free diet.

In the first week Hema was very shy and withdrawn and didn't speak much to adults or children. She engaged in activities quietly but seemed 'down'.

As the weeks progressed, Hema came out of herself, and her personality began to shine through. She started to engage more with the other children, to smile and laugh and offer to help the adults. Because she had attended for several weeks, she knew the routines and structures and started to help 'new' children who were a bit unsure. By the end of SMASH Hema was like a different child; she was more confident, happy and relaxed. **Hema said:** *"I was happy at SMASH- it was really fun. We went on trips, and it helped me to get more creative. I made new friends and improved my fitness. I hope I can go to SMASH next year."*

Hema's Mum was so grateful that SMASH helped the children to get out of the house during the long summer holidays. She reported that over the summer Hema's eczema had improved whereas normally in school holidays it got worse because they would be inside a lot. She also said that her confidence improved, and it was so good to see her smiling. Mum was grateful that Level Trust had organised a dairy free diet which had also helped her eczema improve.



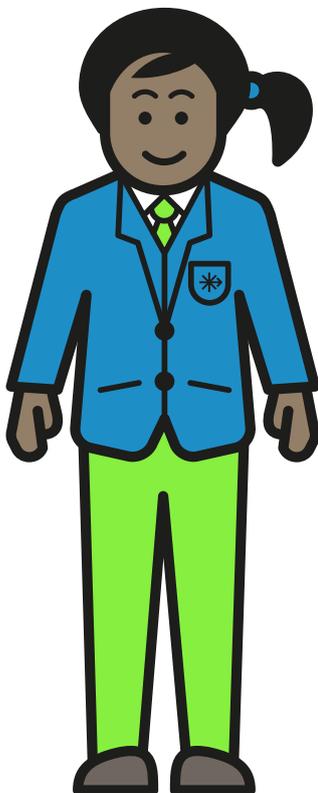
Tom*, age 10

Tom was referred to SMASH because he was the youngest child in his family and his older siblings were all teenagers. His parents were working and he would be spending the majority of the holidays indoors on devices.

At first, Tom was reluctant to engage with the activities. He said he didn't want to be at SMASH, he didn't like being outside and he didn't like doing crafts. Staff worked hard to engage him in the activities, offering him choices when he didn't want to participate and he gradually started to shrug off his initial reluctance and joined in. By the end of the week, he was engaging happily and didn't want SMASH to end; he asked if he could come again the following week.

Tom said: *"I did lots of fun things and made some new friends. My favourite activity was painting the elephants."*

Mum said: *"SMASH gave Tom something to do. If he wasn't going to SMASH, he would have been on the sofa all day."*



Kyra*, age 8

Kyra attended SMASH for a week and had a great experience participating in all the activities enthusiastically.

Mum said: *"The whole SMASH experience was lovely, Kyra came back with a massive smile on her face every day- she was so happy. She came back buzzing! I recommended it to everyone I knew. I will most definitely enrol her if I have the opportunity next year. She loved the SMASH t-shirt she was given and making the tie-dye one. She wants to wear it every day. The whole experience was lovely for her. With the times as they are, we decided we couldn't go away even for a couple of days so it was a lovely opportunity for her. It really stimulated her."*

Who did we work with?

Schools

Children we worked with came from every local authority or academy school in Luton.

Gender

226 out of 228 Uniform Exchange users surveyed answered our gender question. **97% (220)** were female and **3% (6)** were male.

For the children who engaged in our holiday scheme **48% (222)** were male and **52% (241)** female.

Disability and special educational needs

Of **228** Uniform Exchange users, **14% (32)** said they had a disability and **7% (17)** said they had a long term illness.

For the children who engaged in our holiday scheme **7% (32)** had a disability, long-term illness or special educational need.

Of the 796 children and adults who we talked to about the services of the Uniform Exchange and SMASH, we gathered the following ethnicity data:

Ethnicity		
African	60	7.5%
Bengali/Bangladeshi	44	5.5%
Black British	159	20%
Caribbean	20	2.5%
Gypsy or Irish Traveller	8	1%
Indian	28	3.5%
Other Asian	35	4.5%
Other ethnic background	32	4%
Other mixed background	52	6.5%
Other white background	32	4%
Pakistani	171	21.5%
White and Black African	8	1%
White British	147	18.5%



A massive thank you to the children, families and schools who contributed to this report.

**You are the heart
of Level Trust.**

Contributors

Main funders

Thank you to all those who make our work possible. Our main funders and supporters for 2021–22 were:

Amateurs Trust

Arriva

BLCF Community Investment Fund

CAF American Donor Fund

Children In Need

easyJet

Energise Luton

Garfield Weston Foundation

Luton Citizens Fund

Mrs BL Robinson Charitable Trust

Postcode Places Trust

Steel Charitable Trust

Swire Charitable Trust

The National Lottery Community Fund

Wixamtree Trust

The generous donors of Luton and Bedfordshire.

Partners

Partnership is key to how Level Trust work. Our partners refer children to our work, and share their skills, experience and resources. The expertise that they share makes our work possible.

This year we worked with children from every local authority or academy school in Luton and with one independent school.

Thank you to our delivery partners for your advice, support and generosity:

Adventures Into

Boxing Saves Lives

Caritas

Community Interest Luton

Discover Islam

Energise Luton

High Sheriff of Bedfordshire

Inspire FM

Laptops4Learning

Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire

Luton Christian Fellowship

Luton Council Education Service

Luton Council Refugee Service

Luton Foodbank

Luton Sixth Form College

Luton Town Football Club

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