

Empowering
communities
& transforming
young

lives.

A photograph of two young girls on a playground. The girl in the foreground is wearing a pink leopard-print shirt, glasses, and a yellow wristband, and is holding onto a thick green rope. The girl in the background is wearing a white floral shirt and is also holding onto the rope. They are both smiling. The background shows a green field and a cloudy sky.

Level Trust
gives children
what they need
for learning.

Working across **76 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	16
Children's stories	24
Who did we work with?	26
Thank you	28

What we did.

Over 2022/23 we worked with children on **11,009** occasions, **2,208** more than the year before. We did this by providing:



215

children with a computer through our work with **Luton Learning Link**.



7,203

children with a total of **14,906** items of free school uniform through our Uniform Exchange.

SMASH

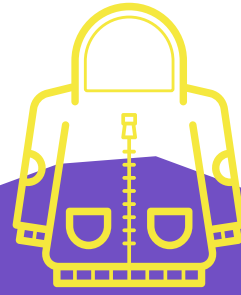
440

children attended **SMASH**.



618

children with **free**
school shoes.



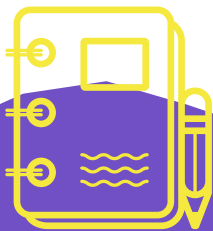
464

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



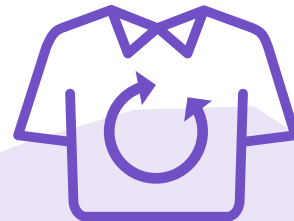
1,645

children with **presents**
at Christmas time.



424

children with **learning**
resources.



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

45.32

tonnes of CO²
equivalent.



How did we listen?

To understand the impact our work had we:

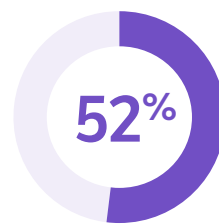
- Surveyed **440 children** who took part in our activity scheme.
- Surveyed **21 children** and **86 parents and carers** who used the Uniform Exchange.
- Ran feedback sessions with **36 children** in three schools.
- Collected case studies and feedback from **11 school partners**.
- Recorded details of every **Uniform Exchange** order.
- Collected diversity data from **440 children** who attended our activity scheme and **1,490 parents and carers** who used the Uniform Exchange.
- Spoke to over **100 school professionals** working with children and families.

Why children needed us.

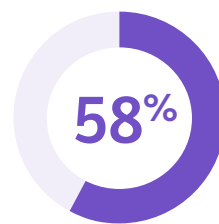
This year, we asked over **100 professionals** working with families about the wellbeing of children and young people, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), education, access to basics – including food, utilities, clothing and basic furniture – and their lived experience of poverty. Collectively, these frontline professionals work with around **4,000 children** – many of whom are living in poverty.

Comparisons with the findings from the 2022 Level Trust Impact Report demonstrates a very clear downward trend in the standard of living for these children and young people. The cost-of-living crisis continues to have a significant and enduring impact on children's wellbeing and life prospects. Alongside this, inflation is having a disproportionate impact on families living in poverty.

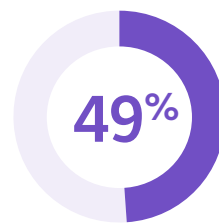
Professionals working directly with families and children told us that families were reporting an inability to access the following basics:



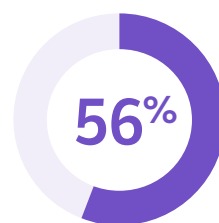
cannot afford enough **food and nutrition.**



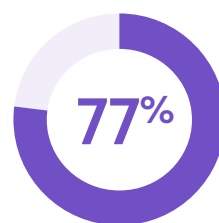
cannot afford **gas and electricity.**



go without basic furniture such as **beds, sofas and appliances.**



are not able to afford their **rent or equivalent.**



go without **IT equipment** for education or employment.

Children and young people are going without enough food which is impacting on their physical and mental health, which is, in turn, impacting on their education and both causing and exacerbating trauma.

Similarly, households are going without heating or washing due to the significant costs of doing so. This is leaving many children without basic levels of hygiene, with many living in cold, damp homes. Families cannot afford the basic standard of physical care required to make their attendance in education possible, let alone the essential resources required to travel to their education settings, the correct uniform or access learning online.

These households are marginalised by their financial constraints. The trauma caused by, or resulting in, the circumstances they are living through is increasing. We measured this by asking professionals about adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs) in the home.

They told us that:

76%

Mental illness

is present in 76% of the households.

42%

Domestic violence

in 42% of the households.

71%

Parental separation

in 71% of the households.

66%

Verbal abuse

in 66% of the households.

There is a national mental health crisis and going without basics is worsening the emotional wellbeing of many children and young people in Luton. The high level of mental illness (and lack of access to support services) is linked to poor educational outcomes and increasing numbers of children being unable to attend or access education. Schools are doing their best to plug the gap in relation to these services but with their budgets being stretched further year-on-year, many children can fall through the gaps.¹

Professionals told us that:

- Mental illness is not being treated sufficiently or early enough to prevent long-term impacts. Families feel abandoned, and problems are escalating.
- Home lives are incredibly stressful for both parents and children as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. In some cases, this is leading to substance abuse, neglect and self-harm being used as coping mechanisms and is contributing to family breakdowns, including increased emotional and physical abuse.
- Children living in poverty are very isolated by their circumstances, particularly compared to their peers; they struggle with building appropriate relationships and accessing opportunities outside their homes.
- Many of our children and young people are suffering with poor self-esteem and lack confidence, at a level that stops them from attending school or college.

1. The State of Child Poverty 2023, Buttle UK

In conversation with frontline school staff, they told us repeatedly that the situation for families is worsening. The number of families accessing the support of Level Trust corroborates this assertion; demand for services is at an unprecedented level. From the data collected from staff in schools across Luton, over **60%** of the families they support require critical services, such as financial support for rent and utilities, as well as food banks, support with purchasing clothing and uniform for their child(ren), welfare assistance and mental health services.

We also asked over **80 families** about their ability to be able to purchase basic items that their child(ren) need for school. A majority of respondents told us that 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 having low paid work.

Reason cannot afford school uniform*	Percentage of families who gave this reason	
	2021–22	2022–23
Family trauma	7%	5%
Job loss	9%	7%
Long term illness or disability in the family	29%	12%
Low paid work	25%	48%
Changes in benefits	5%	6%
Debt	40%	29%
More than four children in the household	13%	16%
Recently arrived in the UK	7%	9%
Single parent	57%	60%
Living in temporary accommodation	14%	12%

*This data came from the **86 families** who answered our survey.

One father told us he had lost his job and they had children with special educational needs, so his wife was a stay-at-home mum as it was not possible for them to both work. He was desperately trying to find employment but there was a gap between his last pay packet and when he would be paid by any new employer. Benefit payments would take weeks to come through and they had used a high interest credit card so they could buy food and other essentials for their family.

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

Children are at risk of harm

In previous years, data collected by Level Trust has made it clear that going without warm clothing and footwear that fits affects a child's physical health, causing them to become unwell or experience physical discomfort.

This 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. Children told us that they worried if they did not have the right uniform and that they felt embarrassed and 'different' to their peers. Sophie told us that she felt 'anxious' when she did not have the right uniform and that it also made her 'mad and sad'. Lack of access to the

correct uniform directly impacts children's physical and psychological health with girls, ethnic and religious minorities, gender-diverse students and poorer students suffering harm disproportionately.²

Data released by The Children's Society from the last two years shows that uniform costs are around **£287** for a child in primary school and **£422** for a child in secondary school. These costs put huge pressure on families who are already struggling. As a result, many families in Luton are having to cut back on other essentials such as food or electricity.

Often parents will elect to keep their children at home if they do not have the correct uniform. It is important that children are in school both to ensure that they can access their learning and to ensure they reach their academic potential but also for safeguarding reasons; children being absent from education for prolonged periods and/or on repeat occasions can act as a vital warning sign to a range of safeguarding issues.


Young people also told us how going without food made them lack energy and stopped them being able to concentrate. We work in partnership with Luton Foodbank to make sure that families are referred and/or signposted to this service should they be experiencing food insecurity. As part of Level Trust's SMASH holiday provision for

². National Library of Medicine, 2021



disadvantaged children, we also ensure that all children who attend are given breakfast and lunch. Where there are concerns that children and their families may not be able to access an evening meal, children are sent home with food parcels that will contain enough food to feed all members of their family that evening.

Many of the families we work with struggle to access basic items for their home – including appropriate bedding. We work closely with schools to identify need and to help children and young people understand how they can support disadvantaged and vulnerable members of their community. In collaboration with a local primary school, we have been able to work with their children to help them to fundraise to raise enough money to provide bedding for several families living in one of the most deprived wards in Luton.



“In addition to providing academic support, Level Trust has also extended assistance to disadvantaged families by providing bedding. This initiative aims to address basic needs and ensure that families have a comfortable and secure home environment. By alleviating financial strain and providing essential household items, Level Trust helps create a sense of stability and security for families facing economic hardship.”

Senior Leader, a Luton Secondary School

Children participate less in learning

15 out of 86 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, *"Every year I worry about buying uniform. I've got three children and two are in high school. It's so expensive and we barely manage to get by every week without buying extras like uniform. Sometimes I can't sleep because I am so anxious about buying it all. It's just so embarrassing not to be able to provide the things my children need."*


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.

"Every week, when we have to bring ingredients to school, I sit and watch my friends cooking with the stuff their mum has sent from home. Everyone thinks I'm forgetful. I'd rather they think that than know that my mum can't afford the ingredients."

R, a 12-year-old boy

Children feel worried

25 out of 36 children surveyed said they worried about not having the right things for school and **77 out of 86 parents** said they worried about it too. Young people told us that they felt anxious about getting in trouble with teachers or being bullied for looking different.



*“Other kids at school
laughed at me. The bottoms
of my shoes were coming off
and they just kept taking the
p**s out of me. I got so angry
I punched one of them and
then I was in trouble. I didn’t
say why I did it.”*

The impact we had.

Children's basic needs were met

Over the year we gave Luton children **14,906** items of school uniform, **618** pairs of school shoes, **404** winter coats, **424** sets of learning resources and **215** laptops.

12 out of 12 (100%) schools surveyed said our work met children's basic needs for warm and waterproof clothing.

“Level Trust has provided incredible support to Lea Manor High School, contributing to a more inclusive and enriching educational environment for our students.

Level Trust has been instrumental in ensuring that every student at Lea Manor High School has access to essential educational resources by providing free uniforms across all year groups. This initiative has notably alleviated financial strain on families.

Level Trust has generously offered free shoe vouchers to support students at Lea Manor High School. By enabling students to acquire suitable footwear, this initiative has enhanced their comfort, safety, and confidence within the school environment, positively impacting overall student well-being.”

Senior Leader, Lea Manor High School

86 out of 86 parents who answered our survey 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 great because I have been able to get help from Level Trust for my children’s uniform and I have been able to get food from Luton Foodbank. I haven’t got much left at the end of the month, but I am not having to put school uniform on my credit card again.”

Father of three children

“I don’t need to worry about the start of the school year now I know I can go to the Uniform Exchange for help. I used to dread it every time the summer came, and I couldn’t enjoy the time with my children. It made my mental health so bad. The year my youngest went to high school and I knew they would need a laptop, I got so stressed that I went to the doctor to get anti-depressants.”

Mother of two 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

69 out of 86 (80%) 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. Schools told us that through the provision of digital devices, their young people were more engaged in their home learning and removed one of the barriers to them attaining in line with their non-Pupil Premium peers.

“In response to the digital disparities faced by many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, Level Trust has provided Chromebooks to Pupil Premium students. These devices serve as invaluable tools for accessing online resources, completing homework and coursework, and engaging in digital learning activities. By equipping PP students with Chromebooks, Level Trust empowers them to overcome barriers to learning and participate fully in their education.”

Pupil Premium Lead, a Luton High School

Schools also noted that children attended school more because of our support.

“Parents can be reluctant to send their child to school if they do not have the appropriate uniform. Knowing that we can contact Level Trust and that families can access what they need via the Uniform Exchange means that we can get some of our most vulnerable children back into school swiftly meaning that their education is not disrupted, and we are able to provide the wrap around care that they desperately need.”

Inclusion Lead, a Luton primary school

Our activity scheme, called SMASH, gave children the opportunity to try new things and do fun activities. It also supports parents to continue to work during the long school holidays.

“It is so hard to arrange everything during the holidays. Holiday care is so expensive it is not worth me working. SMASH is a godsend! She has lots of fun and I go to work stress-free.”

Single mother who works and receives benefits

Children grew in confidence and had fun

100% of children who took part in SMASH (440) showed an improvement in their confidence.

“We did fun things that made me confident because SMASH is all about being kind and brave.”

Key Stage 2 child who attended Summer SMASH

They also told us that they enjoyed the activities, trying new things and valued the interactions with trusted adults. One child said their favourite thing about SMASH was *“that all the staff care about us.”*

“If there is a choice between going home or staying at SMASH – I choose to stay at SMASH.”

Sophia, age 10

“Can I stay at SMASH until Sunday?”

Key Stage 2 child who attended Winter SMASH

Children told us that, when they had the right uniform, they felt more confident because they looked like their classmates, could take part in lessons and could play with their friends.

“When you have the right uniform you think, yes – I can do that!”

Ava, age 8



**“SMASH
saved the
summer!”**

Hussain who attended Summer SMASH



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

Schools also remarked on children's improved confidence.

“The Uniform Exchange enables children to have a good quality uniform which has a huge impact on their confidence.”

Family Support Worker, a Luton Primary School

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.

“After being in touch with Level Trust, support for our families in need has been immediate and extremely gratefully received. Initially, Level Trust provided a family living in poverty who recently came to the UK, and were living in temporary accommodation, with Christmas presents for their two children. This supported the family financially at a really difficult time and delighted the children.

The family have since moved to permanent accommodation and Level Trust has gone above and beyond to also provide a Chromebook for the eldest child to complete homework on and has supported us at school to buy a piano keyboard for the younger child to have school music lessons on.

The impact this has had on this family is amazing. The whole family's financial and mental wellbeing has been supported by

Level Trust with these actions, in addition to improving educational outcomes for both SEN children.

Following this, Level Trust has also supported us in school with providing school shoe vouchers and a birthday present for the children of families we are working with in partnership with the Early Help Team. Seeing the relief on a parent's face when we have been able to help with these small things is heartwarming, and we are very grateful to Level trust for everything they have done for our families.”

SENDCo, a Luton Primary School

“The support we receive from Level Trust is invaluable to so many of our families & enhances so many lives. This includes shoe & coat vouchers, donations of Chromebooks & toys, Smash holiday programmes and events for families. The Chromebooks mean that more children can access their home learning. We are very grateful to the Level Trust Team and their continued support.”

Family Support Worker, a Luton Primary School

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.

“When I exchange my son’s old uniform for the next size up, I feel like I am not a charity case – that I’m not just taking handouts. I am giving something and getting something. It feels fair.”

Mother, Uniform Exchange customer

Parents also felt less worried knowing that Level Trust would be there to support them.

“Thank you so much for the shoes and uniform. I was so worried about where I was going to get those things for 3 children. I was beginning to miss meals so I could save money for their school things.”

Family on a work visa with no recourse to public funds

Thanks to the very generous donations from partners at Christmas, we were able to provide **1,645** children with gifts at Christmas time. This meant that families did not need to worry about the additional cost of buying presents and prevented many families from going into debt. As a result, Father Christmas was able to visit hundreds of children on Christmas Eve and deliver gifts to many members of our community for whom Christmas is a special time. Without the hard work of our partners, many children across the town would have woken up on Christmas morning to empty stockings. Parents tell us that they have been ‘devastated’ when they have been unable to afford to buy gifts and have had to try and find the words to explain to their children why Father Christmas has not visited their home.

“I am very grateful to Level Trust for all the gifts they shared with me at Christmas time. This kindness enabled me to hold a party and invite all the asylum families living in Luton hotels.

Seeing the happy smiling faces of all the children and their parents when Father Christmas was giving them all a gift provided by Level Trust was a truly touching sight.”

Refugee support worker, Luton

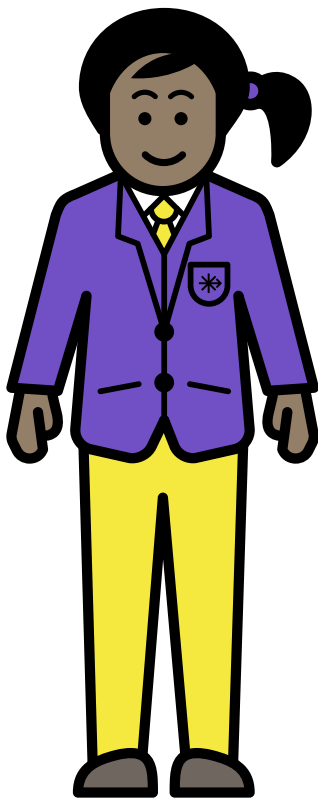
“Christmas for me is not a happy time. I don’t have enough money on a normal week and then Christmas makes it a hundred times worse. One year I had to tell the kids that Father Christmas was not real as I couldn’t afford to buy them anything. It broke my heart. I felt like such a rubbish mum that I couldn’t even do this simple thing for my children. When I knew that I could get presents from Level Trust, I cried. It’s hard to put into words what a difference it has made. For the first time in so, so long, I could look forward to Christmas a bit knowing that they would have something to open on Christmas morning. Everyone should support Level Trust. Presents might seem like a small thing to you but to us it has meant the world.”

Mother of 4 children, Luton

A close-up portrait of a young girl with dark skin and braided hair, wearing purple-rimmed glasses and a pink jacket over a white ribbed shirt. She has a colorful flower sticker on her forehead and is smiling. A large purple octagon is overlaid on the lower left, containing white text. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with warm lighting.

***“Children were
able to **enjoy** their
childhood.”***

Children's Stories.



Maryam*

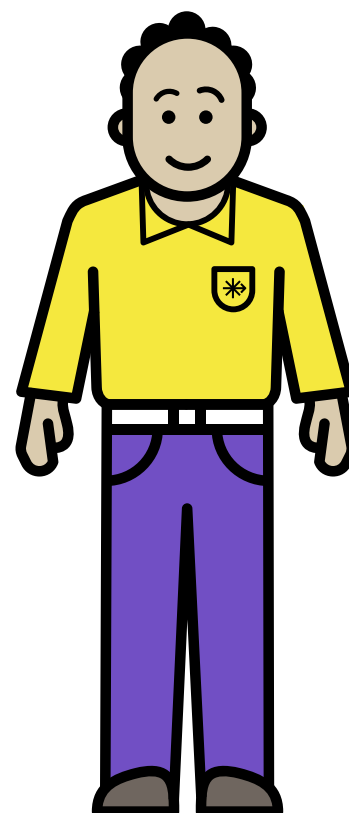
Maryam is 9 and her mum has been bringing her up alone since her dad died when she was 5. Maryam's mother is a healthcare assistant and works full time. With the cost-of-living crisis, her mother has found it harder and harder to make ends meet. School shoes and uniform are expensive, and she came to the Uniform Exchange when she could no longer afford to replace the things Maryam had grown out of. Level Trust was able to provide all the items that Maryam needed and was also able to provide a warm, safe space for her mum to talk to someone about how she was feeling. Staff in the Uniform Exchange signposted her to additional charities in the town who would be able to help. As a result of the support she received from Level Trust, Maryam's mother told us:

"It's one less thing for me to worry about. I just didn't know what I would do and where I would find the money to buy school shoes. Thank you. You have all been so kind."

David*

David is 8 and his family has had significant involvement from Children's Social Care. The family worker at his school got in contact with Level Trust to ask if they were able to access any holiday provision for him as they were concerned for his welfare during the school holidays. David was able to attend SMASH for four weeks during the summer and was provided with breakfast and lunch. He was also sent home with enough food for his family to have an evening meal every day. Trusted adults were able to check in with David and his parents every day to make sure that any additional concerns were raised and that he was effectively safeguarded during a time when his school was closed. He was also able to have a great time taking part in creative, sporting and team building activities with his peers. When asked if he enjoyed himself, the family worker told us that he said SMASH was:

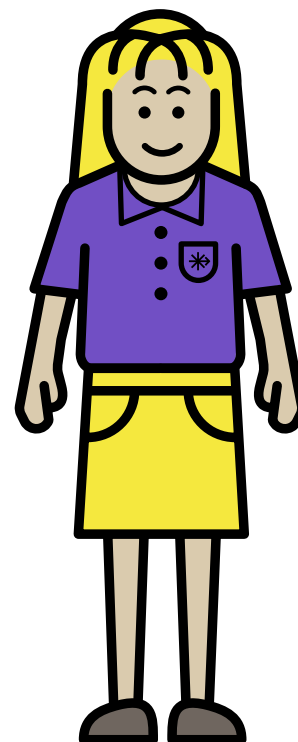
"Ten out of ten brilliant!"



Saskia*

Saskia is 5 and lives with her family in a hotel room. They have recently arrived in the UK as refugees. They have no one they know and speak very limited English. Saskia is very withdrawn and the trauma she has experienced has had a significant impact on her emotional wellbeing. Her mum is worried about her. Saskia and her brothers and sisters need to start at a school in Luton and their mother does not have any money to be able to buy the uniform for all of her children. Refugee Services put the family in contact with Level Trust and arranged a time for them to come to the Uniform Exchange to be kitted out with all the things they need for school. In a small way, we were able to help to help Saskia's family at a point in their life when they were in crisis. Saskia is now settled in her new school, and we have seen the family again as children grow quickly and the children needed larger uniform. Saskia's mother told us:

***"I am very happy that you have helped us.
Thank you."***



Who did we work with?



Gender

84 out of 86 Uniform Exchange parents surveyed answered our gender question. **83% (70)** were female and **16% (13)** were male. **1% (1)** said they were other.

435 children who attended SMASH provided information about their gender.

204 children (**47%**) who attended SMASH stated that they were female and **231 (53%)** that they were male.



Disability and special educational needs

From a sample of **86** Uniform Exchange parents, **9% (8)** said they had a disability and **15% (13)** said they had a long-term illness.

For the children who engaged in our holiday scheme, **9.5% (42)** had a disability, long-term illness or special educational need.



Pupil Premium Children

49% of children who attended our SMASH programmes were eligible for free school meals. Applicants for free school meals who are in receipt of Universal Credit must have an equivalent annual net earned income of no more than **£7,400** in order to be eligible for free school meals.

Ethnicity of UE users 01.09.22 – 31.08.23		Ethnicity of UE users 01.09.22 – 31.08.23	
Afghan	0.3	Italian	0.5
African	21	Jordanian	0.07
Albanian	1	Kashmiri	0.07
Algerian	0.07	Kurdish	0.14
Angolan	0.07	Kuwaiti	0.07
Arab	3.2	Lebanese	0.07
Asian	1.7	Lithuanian	0.07
Bangladeshi	4.6	Mix	0.57
Black African	2.2	Moroccan	0.28
Black African & Caribbean	0.07	Other	4.9
Black British	0.9	Pakistani	11.4
Brazilian	0.14	Filipino	0.14
British Asian	0.07	Polish	2.9
Caribbean	1.5	Roma	0.14
Chinese	0.28	Romanian	4.2
Eastern European	0.07	Sri Lankan	0.35
Egyptian	0.07	Ukrainian	0.21
European	2.3	White & Asian	1.3
French	0.3	White & Black African	2
Greek	0.2	White & Black Caribbean	0.9
Hungarian	0.5	White Asian	0.85
Indian	3.9	White British	19.2
Iranian	0.35	White European	0.92
Iraqi	0.21	White Other	1
Irish	1		

Thank you.

A huge and heartfelt **thank you** to the children, families and schools who contributed to this report. You are amazing and we feel so privileged to work with you all.

Contributors

Main Funders & Donors

Thank you to all those who make our work possible.

The Amateurs Trust
BLCF Community Investment Fund
Brown Dog Trust
The Connolly Foundation
easyJet
Energise Luton
Garfield Weston Foundation
John Aphthorp Charity
Mrs B L Robinson Charitable Trust
National Lottery Community Fund
Postcode Places Trust
The Steel Charitable Trust
St Mary's Church, Redbourn
Swire Charitable Trust
Wixamtree Trust

The generous donors of Luton and Bedfordshire.

Partners

Partnership is key to how Level Trust works. Our partners refer children to our services and share their skills, experience and resources. The expertise they bring (and the time they give) makes our work possible.

This year we worked with children from every local authority or academy school in Luton. To deliver this work we worked with **76 schools** and multiple partners across Luton. This year our partners included:

Adventures Into
Caritas-Diocese of Northampton
Citizens Advice
Boxing Saves Lives
Dan The Skipping Man
Discover Islam
Laptops4Learning
NGYT
NOAH Enterprise
Hygiene Bank
KidsOut
Luton Foodbank
Luton Council Education Service
Luton Council Refugee Service
Salvation Army
Stepping Stones
University of Bedfordshire Access Partnership Team
Wholehearted Childhood Charity
Youthscape

Thank you for all your time, advice, effort and generosity. A special thank you to the following schools for your engagement and commitment to partnership working:

Beechwood Primary School
Challney High School For Girls
Chantry Primary Academy
Denbigh Primary School
Denbigh High School
Downside Primary School
Farley Junior School
Foxdell Junior School
Hillborough Junior School
Leagrave Primary School
Lea Manor High School
Norton Road Primary School
Pirton Hill Primary School
Putteridge Primary School
River Bank Primary School
Sacred Heart Primary School
Southfield Primary Academy
St Joseph's Catholic Junior School
St Martin De Porres Catholic Primary & Nursery School
St Matthew's Primary School
Stockwood Park Academy
Stopsley Primary School
Surrey Street Primary School
Waulud Primary School
Warden Hill Junior School
Whipperley Infant Academy



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