

# chancesFOR CHiLDREN

**BUTTLE**uk

## **A year of COVID-19 in Crisis**

**The impact of the pandemic for children,  
young people and families already on the  
brink**

### **Executive Summary**

## Introduction

Buttle UK provides individually tailored grants to support wellbeing and capacity to engage in education for children and young people living in poverty and who have been impacted by crisis. These individually tailored grants of up to £2000 fund items and activities that ensure children and young people are living in a safe and equipped home that meets their physical and emotional needs, and that they have access to support networks outside of the home. These items and activities are not a luxury; they are what most parents would expect their own children to have. Grant applications are submitted by a frontline worker who has assessed the educational and emotional needs of each child within the home, to ensure that children receive the items and activities that will be most beneficial to them.

We have seen the impact of COVID-19 through our grant giving. From April 2020 – January 2021 there has been a big increase in application and grant activity compared to the same period in the previous year:

- > **Application** numbers have risen by **57%**, from **2178** to **3426**
- > The number of **families supported** has increased by **107%**, from **1186** to **2455**
- > **Rejection** rates have reduced from **50%** to **30%**
- > Chances for Children **spend** has increased by **166%**, from **£1,245,309** to **£3,315,415**.

Although changes are partly due to Buttle UK having increased funds available to support the COVID-19 pandemic, more families have been meeting the threshold for support due to the impacts of COVID-19.

This executive summary provides the main findings from Buttle UK's "A year of COVID-19" report. The report uses Buttle UK statistics and families' voices to highlight how families in crisis have been impacted through a year of the pandemic.



## Changes to the crisis landscape

For families who receive support, Buttle UK assigns “reasons for award”. These reasons represent the experiences that have led to children being in crisis and the circumstances and issues they are experiencing at the point of application. Many children have been exposed to domestic abuse, are victims of neglect and abuse, living with a parent/carer with mental or physical health issues, or have a parent in prison. Many children and parents/carers also have developmental disorders or additional learning needs. Many children are on Child in Need or Child Protection Plans, living in kinship care or are estranged from family and living in supported accommodation. It is common for children and young people to be experiencing mental health problems, be disengaged from education and/or displaying behaviour problems or offending behaviour. The full list of reasons for support can be found on the Buttle UK dashboard within [NPC's Local needs databank](#).

Across applications, frontline workers commonly state that COVID-19 has exacerbated the impact of, and limited the capacity to overcome, trauma for children and families and crisis. Since the beginning of COVID-19, we have seen an increase in the proportion of children and young people experiencing particular crises, and the number of parents and children presenting with emotional and behavioural issues. Comparing the COVID-19 period to the previous year, the proportion of families experiencing:

- > **Child neglect** has risen from **13%** to **17%**
- > **Child abuse** has risen from **10%** to **13%**
- > **Domestic abuse** has risen from **67%** to **78%**
- > Children on a **Child in Need Plan** has doubled from **3%** to **6%**
- > **Parent/carer mental health problems** have risen from **21%** to **27%**
- > General difficulties in **parents' coping** have risen from **17%** to **25%**
- > Children **disengaged from education** has almost tripled, from **5%** to **14%**
- > **Child behaviour and emotional difficulties** have risen from **71%** to **75%**
- > Child **development problems** (e.g., developmental delay) have risen from **15%** to **22%**
- > Co-occurrence of issues has also increased; for example, co-occurring **domestic abuse, parent mental health problems and child behavioural / emotional difficulties** has risen from **13%** to **17%**.

There have also been changes to the **financial circumstances** of beneficiaries during COVID-19:

- > The **average weekly household income** has increased during COVID-19 to **£329.37** from **£296.64**.

Although there has been a rise in weekly income, this is still substantially lower than the national weekly average income per individual of £464-476.<sup>1</sup> It is likely that the increase in weekly household income among beneficiaries is, in part, due to the increase in COVID-19-related funding support through universal credit.

Despite the increase in income, **levels of debt have risen** dramatically:

- > **72%** of families receiving a Chances for Children grant are **in debt**, compared to only **50%** in the same period before COVID-19.
- > The **average debt** of Chances for Children beneficiaries has risen by almost a quarter (**24%**), from **£1,795.43** to **£2,222.49**.

This suggests that additional Universal Credit provided to some families in crisis has not been sufficient to support with increased living costs.

We can identify two possible reasons for these increases in financial difficulties, both of which are troubling:

- > COVID-19 has led to an increase in the number children and families experiencing abuse, neglect, mental health and behaviour problems and debt. All these increases will lead to further severe crises.
- > Disruptions to frontline care as a result of the pandemic mean that workers have only had the capacity to apply for Chances for Children grants in more severe cases, or themselves are only able to identify and work with families experiencing higher levels of crisis i.e., the crisis threshold for support is increasing.

If both are true, then it suggests more children are experiencing crisis and more are going under the radar.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandproductivity/datasets/averageweeklyhouseholdincome>

## Families' voices: The impact of COVID-19 in Crisis

As part of evaluation, Buttle UK sends surveys to families to ask whether and how Chances for Children grants have helped children and young people. To understand families' needs more broadly, we have been asking families how they have been impacted by COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. Families' responses have provided invaluable insight to how COVID-19 adds pressure to families in crisis. Overall, 562 families have provided feedback:

- > **94%** indicated that they have been **negatively impacted** in some way by COVID-19; only 6% indicated that they have not been negatively impacted.
- > Over a third (**35%**) of families referred to the words **“hard”, “difficult”, “struggle”, “bad” or “tough”**.
- > Only **3%** of families indicated that there have been **positives** of the pandemic, which included fleeing domestic abuse after experiencing increased abuse during lockdowns, being able to spend more time together as a family and receiving items that have helped from Buttle UK.

The main themes to arise from the impact of the crisis were mental health problems, difficulty engaging in education and financial hardship:

- > **33%** of families highlighted that **mental health problems** have worsened during the pandemic.
- > **26%** of families highlighted the difficulties of being **physically isolated** from others.
- > **30%** of families highlighted the increased **financial hardship** they have suffered as a result of the pandemic.
- > **21%** of families highlighted that they have found **home-schooling** difficult or impossible.
- > **9%** highlighted that **housing challenges** have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

*“I took in my grandchildren from birth. I get nothing for them bar [child tax credits] and [child benefit] ...I’ve slept on a sofa in a living room for 15 years. [Coronavirus] made us more vulnerable, more invisible [and] caused us severe hardship. [I] got in debt more, really struggled... Everyone has had changes, but think of those with disabilities and additional needs, those just left to struggle and rot. So many bad things have happened lately, I felt very down... My daughter and granddaughter both had car crashes. My fridge/freezer has packed up... We have had three deaths in our family. My son has freaked out over going back to college as he has many disabilities / additional needs. He has self-harmed, he's just had 15 stitches in his wrist. [He's] very lucky this time, blood pumped all over... We don't get any breaks because we can't afford it.... To top it off my car packed up.”*

**Mental health and wellbeing:** Families reported that lockdown created or intensified mental health problems among parents/carers and/or their children. Responses primarily focused on anxiety and depression. In some cases, crucial child therapy was stopped, creating a regression and resurfacing of issues related to the trauma children had experienced. Many children have found it difficult to understand why their social interaction with friends and relatives is limited. Siblings were arguing with each other more frequently. Children's sleeping patterns were disrupted. Children have experienced greater mood swings and behaviour difficulties. Multiple parents reported that their children had attempted suicide during the pandemic.

**Isolation:** Many families highlighted how much more difficult it is to be isolated from others when in crisis. Parents have been unable to receive support from family and friends from whom they rely on to get through crisis, and are struggling to cope alone, looking after children whilst also dealing with past trauma and financial difficulties.

*"It has caused a lot of stress and upset with my family. My mother is the one who helps me massively with my three children with being a single parent due to a very abusive relationship with my ex. Since the first lockdown in March, my mother had to shield with her having low immunity...which left me unable to visit my mother or vice-versa. Then with all three children being off school, extra food and having to buy games and craft stuff for the kids took my already small left-over budget on my universal credit to the very bare minimum, which had a knock-on effect... I was going two and a half weeks sometime without a penny until my next pay day, which has ended where I had to ask neighbours for food to see until my pay date! My mental health has taken a massive strain again after an attempted overdose last year, being alone with barely any money left for three young children, unable to see my family and friends... it has been the hardest few months of my life."*

**Financial difficulties:** Families report struggling to afford food; they have been forced to buy items at inflated prices from local convenience shops and larger supermarkets where cheaper items were in short supply. Parents have lost their jobs, had their hours reduced, been furloughed or been unable to work due to childcare demands or needing to shield. Families have fallen behind with essential bills. Families have needed to buy more food whilst children have been home all day, and heating and electricity costs have risen. Some parents have needed to ask friends, relatives or neighbours for additional help and financial support.

**Education:** Many families have been without access to the internet or electronic devices, making it impossible for children to be part of remote learning. Disrupted routines and sleep patterns have left children unable to focus on schooling during the day. Increased mental health difficulties have been impacting children's capacity to engage in education. Parents reported that it's been a struggle trying to home-school multiple children at different school levels or with different educational needs, especially when dealing with other emotional trauma.



*“During lockdown, it affected my family circumstances by the fact we were all under the same roof and trying to deal with my eldest daughter’s anxiety. She couldn’t deal with not going to school, seeing her friends. She refused to do any schoolwork, as she didn’t have a laptop, so was trying to do schoolwork on her phone and then couldn’t do that anymore. Trying to home school my youngest, whilst working from home was challenging too, especially as we didn’t have a laptop. Trying to do her work on my phone was not ideal and she really struggled. After I had put in my hours for work, both girls were bored as they couldn’t play with their friends.”*

**Housing:** Entire families have been living in a single shared room through the pandemic, making it even more difficult to engage in schooling or find respite when trying to overcome trauma. For those who have been rehoused in permanent accommodation, this has been met with difficulty of accessing all of the essential items needed in a new home. Parents with minimal income are unable to afford furniture and appliances that makes a house a home, and one that is equipped to meet children’s needs. Families have been stuck in small flats without outdoor space for children to expel energy. Being without basic whitegoods like fridges means that families have been unable to store food, and therefore had to put themselves more at risk of catching COVID-19 by taking regular trips to the supermarket.

### **Is the impact of COVID-19 getting worse as the pandemic continues?**

Overall, 87 families who completed surveys twice, three months apart (3-month post-grant survey and 6-month post-grant survey). This gives us the unique opportunity to see if different issues have become more or less prominent as the pandemic has continued. We compared the percentage of families who referred to specific difficulties at each time point.

For the 87 families who provided feedback at both time points:

- > **9%** reported that they had **not been affected** at three months, reducing to only **5%** at six months.
- > **28%** of families indicated that **parent and child mental health** was suffering at three months, rising to **33%** at six months.
- > **15%** of families mentioned difficulties with **education** at three months, rising to **24%** at six months.
- > **18%** of families mentioned the difficulties of being **isolated** from others at three months, compared to **23%** at six months.

## Chances for Children grants: Emotional, educational and practical needs during COVID-19

We can also see how the needs of families in crisis have changed during COVID-19 by looking at the changes Buttle UK has seen in the items and activities being requested and provided within Chances for Children grants throughout the course of the pandemic. Priorities have shifted to ensuring that children and young people have access to online learning, that they are living in a comfortable and equipped home, and that they have access to toys, games and items to keep them entertained whilst at home. Change in need can be understood by looking at the proportion of families needing specific items during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic:

- > **IT equipment** – increasing from **43%** of families to **69%**
- > **Educational toys and books** – increasing from **23%** of families to **57%**
- > **Home appliances / whitegoods** – increasing from **26%** of families to **42%**
- > **Home furnishing** – increasing from **25%** of families to **38%**
- > **Beds** – increasing from **35%** of families to **45%**
- > **Clothes** – increasing from **38%** of families to **48%**
- > **Storage furniture** – increasing from **21%** of families to **31%**

We are also providing each family with more of these essential supplies. For example, the average spend on **IT equipment** has increased by **34%** per family, from **£310** to **£414** per family. The spend on **toys and books** has increase by **60%** per family, from **£148** to **£236**.

As children and families have been forced to remain in their home full-time during COVID-19, the effects of not having these essential items becomes even greater. When children do not have access to a hot meal at school, they need the white goods necessary for this hot meal to be provided at home. They need enough educational toys and books to keep them occupied for long hours, and they need the furniture to be able to sit comfortably, engage in schoolwork and be as happy as possible in the home. When multiple children are trying to engage in education, it is not enough to have one laptop or tablet per family, if there are any at all.

We have seen decreases in spend on activities outside of the home during the pandemic due to restrictions preventing these from being possible. This year, we have seen less than half the percentage of families receiving:

- > **Extracurricular activities**, reducing from **51%** of families to **22%**
- > **Family activities**, reducing from **18%** of families to **9%**
- > **Therapy**, reducing from **8%** of families to **4%**

From years of experience delivering these activities, we know how valuable they are for families overcoming trauma. They provide opportunities to build children's confidence; improve skills beyond core attainment, provide something for children to look forward to and create positive memories for families who have experienced a lot of trauma and hardship. To understand more about how these activities help families, see our [2019-2020 impact report](#).



## How do Chances for Children grants help in a pandemic?

Buttle UK invites families who have received Chances for Children grants to provide feedback to help us understand whether and how the grants have helped. We do this to learn about how our grants help and how we can improve.

We use families' responses to create improvement scores for key outcomes. Improvement scores can be out of a possible 100% and are based on how much they report outcomes to have changed (i.e., got worse, not improved, or improved a little, somewhat or a lot). We can see how grants have supported families during COVID-19 by comparing improvements reported by families before the pandemic to those during the pandemic.

Despite the difficulties children and families have faced:

- > **Wellbeing** improvements have remained stable at **61%**
- > **Education** improvements have remained stable at **62%**
- > **Home environment** improvements have increased from **66% to 76%**
- > **Family relationship** improvements have increased from **67% to 73%**
- > **Parent coping** improvements have slightly reduced, from **67% to 63%**

Although children have been unable to attend school for the majority of the year, see family and friends, or access the activities we would normally provide to help children after crisis, Chances for Children grants have resulted in great improvements in children's engagement in education and their wellbeing (confidence, anxiousness, activity levels, mood and friendships). Families indicate that having laptops, tablets and internet access not only means that children have been able to engage in home schooling, but they have also been able to stay in contact with family and friends, positively impacting both wellbeing and education.

*"The laptop which my son uses for his schoolwork and video link ups with other students from his school has helped a great deal. With Jeremy\* losing his confidence due to things he had witness from being very young, he now seems to be able to hold and engage in a conversation with mates online, which was something I never thought I would ever see again, so thank you for everything."*

The additional toys, books, garden supplies and sport equipment provided during COVID-19 have meant that children have been able to stay stimulated, active and healthy at home, and it has helped relieve some lockdown boredom. Toys have aided with early learning and development for children who have been unable to attend nursery. Lots of families noted the importance of being able to get outside during lockdown, whether that be locally or with items that were provided for those who have gardens; bikes have kept children fit and have allowed family trips out locally, and trampolines have been fun, increased children's confidence and even improved mobility.

Additional funding provided for toys and games, essential furniture like beds, sofas, bedroom storage and dining tables have meant that families have been more comfortable in their homes. This has made even more of a difference when families have been spending the majority of their time at home. Families are able to store food without having to go to the supermarket as regularly. Children are able to sleep properly and feel comfortable in bedrooms that have carpet, a place to store their clothes and furnishings that make the rooms feel their own. These basic home items, furniture and games have meant that families now spend more quality time together and have created positive memories in lockdown. Some noted that toys and IT equipment have meant that there are less arguments between children in the home. Despite the fact that we have been unable to provide as many family activities out of the home, families have made the most of being at home together.

*“Buttle UK have helped me and my children massively. My two girls love their bunk beds and they've helped their bedtime routine. They also love their bikes. They love reading books with mummy and doing lots of craft stuff. Their tablets have been a massive help through the pandemic they have learnt so much from them. I just want to say a massive thank you from myself and my children, you've made a huge difference to our lives so thank you so much.”*



## Closing remarks

The evidence in this report highlights that families already in crisis have been made to struggle even more during the pandemic. More families are in debt and struggling financially. Mental health problems have increased in parents and children. More children have been experiencing neglect. More children have been struggling or unable to engage in home-schooling, and parents have struggled to support this on top of dealing with trauma.

Priorities within Buttle UK grant giving have shifted to ensuring that children and young people: are living in homes that are equipped to meet their basic needs; have access to education online; and have toys, games and sport equipment needed to keep them happy, entertained and stimulated at home. The proportion of families in crisis needing basics like a bed, an oven or a laptop has dramatically increased during the pandemic.

As restrictions are eased, more children will need to be reintroduced to the activities that are pivotal for development (including social skills, friendships, motor skills, creativity, confidence and wider wellbeing) and minimise social exclusion. We know that these activities are extremely important in helping children overcome crisis, so it is important that we continue to provide this support. However, the last year has demonstrated that having a fully equipped home, with toys and electronic equipment to engage in online education and maintain social relationships, are not things that should be considered a luxury. We now have evidence to show how all parts of a Chances for Children grant package – even when these have been adapted to meet the changed circumstances of the pandemic – create multiple, positive outcomes.

Over the next few months, the generous additional COVID-19 financial aid that donors and supporters have made available will come to an end; and so, perhaps, will the sense of emergency. However, this report demonstrates the extent of problems that have accumulated for the most vulnerable families over the last 12 months, the consequences of which will be felt for a long time yet. We also know that others will join them, as the impact of recession and job losses become more evident.<sup>2</sup> While levels of need remain high, it is likely that public resources will be more stretched than they have been at any point since the 2008 financial crisis. Therefore, finding ways to make whatever resources are available to support communities go as far as possible will be more important than ever.

In response to this, Buttle UK's Trustees have taken a decision to draw additional funds from our endowment over the next two years. However, even with these extra funds, we know we will be unable to meet the level of need and we therefore hope that others will again join us to help create more chances for children during these very difficult, unprecedented times.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://neweconomics.org/2021/03/millions-facing-an-income-crisis>