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Hidden inequalities in education: Experiences of London's ethnic minority families navigating the SEND system



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March 2026

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all those who contributed their time and expertise to this research. Special thanks go to the parents and professionals who generously shared their views and experiences through the interviews and focus groups, helping to inform and inspire improvements across the SEND system.

We also extend our thanks to the City Bridge Foundation for funding this work, and to colleagues at Contact for their continued support. We are particularly grateful to the members of the Project Group, whose co-production, guidance, and expert feedback have been integral to the development of this research.

Executive Summary

Introduction

London's SEND system is under unprecedented strain, and the experiences shared by parents in the third year of this research study reveal a consistent picture of unmet needs, inequity, and emotional exhaustion. Against a backdrop of rising demand, stretched resources and widening inequalities, this report explores how ethnicity intersects with other forms of disadvantage to shape London parents' experiences of navigating education support for their children with SEND.

Methodology

The third year of this research set out to explore the experiences of ethnic minority families who are often excluded from research, particularly those facing language, literacy and digital barriers. This report draws on two strands of qualitative research undertaken between May and December 2025:

- **Parent focus groups** – Three in-person focus groups with 17 ethnic minority parents with a child with SEND across Ealing, Lambeth and Lewisham, including Black, mixed Black heritage and Arabic-speaking families.
- **Interviews with SEND professionals** – Nine online interviews with SEND professionals, including Contact staff and representatives from Parent Carer Forums with strong community engagement. These professionals brought both lived and professional expertise to the research.

Discussions centred on three core questions: the barriers families face; the support they have found helpful; and what more is needed to support SEND families.

Key Findings

1. Parents continue to face significant challenges navigating the SEND system

Parents' experiences of accessing support for their children were overwhelmingly negative. Across communities, families described navigating a system characterised by delays, inconsistent provision and limited understanding of their children's needs. Schools were often the source of greatest frustration. Many parents felt unheard, ignored or blamed by school staff, while others described a lack of reasonable adjustments, inappropriate sanctions and exclusionary practices that left children anxious, out of school, or falling behind academically.

System-level failings compounded these difficulties. Parents spoke of constant turnover in SEND teams, poor communication from local authorities (LAs), outdated Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), and chronic shortages of both places in specialist settings and specialist services, such as speech and language therapy or occupational therapy.

2. Ethnicity intersects with other challenges to exacerbate inequalities

While many difficulties are shared across all families, parents from ethnic minority backgrounds often face additional barriers linked to language, cultural stigma, mistrust of services, and fear of challenging authority.

Families with insecure housing or immigration status were particularly vulnerable. Some parents described feeling isolated and overwhelmed, with limited understanding of SEND terminology, rights, and the provision available to their child. These factors commonly delayed the identification of children's additional needs and reduced parents' confidence in advocating for their children.

3. Support that is trusted, culturally sensitive and empowering makes a substantial difference

Amid widespread frustration, parents identified several sources of support that had improved their experience. Peer support networks were described as a lifeline, reducing isolation, building confidence and helping parents understand the complexities of SEND processes. Early diagnosis, access to specialist provision, and respite care were all highly valued.

Support from Contact and other similar organisations, whether through individual family workers, coffee mornings or workshops, was consistently praised. Parents emphasised the importance of practical, personalised guidance, including help with understanding EHCPs, writing letters, preparing for meetings, and navigating appeals. Professionals highlighted the value of holistic, family-centred support, community outreach, culturally sensitive practice and accessible information delivered through a mix of written, verbal and visual formats.

4. Support that families say they need now

Parents and professionals articulated a clear set of priorities for improving support. These include:

- Schools and professionals who listen, act promptly and communicate clearly.
- Earlier, accessible information about rights, SEND processes and local services.
- More inclusive school environments and improved SEND training for staff.
- Increased availability of specialist provision and therapies.
- More respite care and emotional support for families.
- Expanded peer networks and community spaces for SEND families.
- Better language support and translated materials.
- Practical assistance for those facing housing, financial or immigration challenges.

Professionals further emphasised the importance of culturally sensitive support, long-term community outreach, greater diversity in the SEND workforce, and confidence-building approaches that empower parents to advocate for their children.

Next steps for the research

The fourth and final research report (spring 2026) will summarise the key insights from all three years of this research and provide recommendations for how policymakers and practitioners can enhance their support and help families, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds, to overcome barriers to accessing SEND provision.

1. Introduction

This research report is the third in a series of four reports produced by O'Donnell Research & Evaluation for Contact. It is part of a research project exploring the experiences of education for London families from ethnic minority backgrounds with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This research was commissioned by Contact in December 2023, funded by the City Bridge Foundation, and is being conducted in partnership with a Project Group established by Contact to co-produce and guide the research. The Project Group involves key frontline staff from Contact and parents with lived experience of SEND from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

The research aims to examine London parents' experiences of the SEND system and their access to educational support for their children, with a focus on families from ethnic minority backgrounds (the research questions are summarised in Appendix 1). It comes at a time when the SEND system in England is in crisis, due to unprecedented growth in needs and severely stretched resources. Despite significant increases in expenditure on provision within schools and local authorities (LAs), national outcomes for children and young people with SEND have not improved, and there is a growing gap in London between students with additional needs and their peers without SEND¹. The number of parents registering an appeal to the SEND Tribunal also reached a record high in 2024-2025², reflecting parents' lack of satisfaction and confidence in the system.

The government admits that the current system is failing and urgently needs reform, and this report comes just after the publication in February 2026 of the White Paper 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving'³, which sets out proposals to reform the SEND system in England.

What has our research found so far?

This research project began in 2023 with a literature review that summarised the existing research evidence on parents' experiences of the education system⁴. Year 2 involved an online survey of over 400 parents from across London, followed by in-depth interviews with 15 parents from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds whose children have SEND⁵. Our research so far has found much commonality in the experiences of families navigating the SEND system. Parents described the emotional and financial impact of navigating a complex and increasingly adversarial SEND system, and many of the challenges faced in accessing education support for their child are universal to families, irrespective of their ethnicity. However, we also found that families from minority ethnic backgrounds often experience additional barriers, including language barriers, stigma and racial discrimination.

¹ County Councils Network & Isos Partnership (2025). *Special educational needs & disabilities in England: How we got to crisis point, and why we need reform of the system*.

² Ministry of Justice (2025). *Tribunals statistics quarterly: July to September 2025*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tribunals-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2025/tribunal-statistics-quarterly-july-to-september-2025>

³ Department for Education (2026). *Every child achieving and thriving*. UK Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version>.

⁴ O'Donnell, L. (2024). *Research on the experiences of education of London families with disabled children from black and minority ethnic groups – Year 1*. Available at: <https://contact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Contact-City-Bridge-ODonnell-Interim-report-1-13-May-2024-with-logos-1.pdf>

⁵ O'Donnell, L. (2025). *Unheard voices: Education experiences of London Black and minority ethnic families caring for children with SEND*. Available at: <https://contact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Contact-City-Bridge-Research-Year-2-Unheard-Voices-July-2025.pdf>

The third and final year of the research sought to further examine this intersection of SEND and ethnicity in relation to other parental variables, such as English as an additional language (EAL) and socioeconomic status. This report explores the experiences of ethnic minority families in London, including Black, Asian, Arab, and Irish Traveller communities.

2. Methodology

The report is based on two strands of qualitative research conducted between May and December 2025:

- Parent focus groups
- Interviews with SEND professionals

Parent focus groups

Year 3 of the research sought to include ethnic minority parents who might not have been able to access our Year 2 survey (due to language or literacy issues or digital exclusion), and those who face multiple disadvantages. The voices of such families are seldom heard in research due to communication and cultural barriers, as well as mistrust of researchers. To overcome these barriers, we partnered with Contact's London offices to reach parents with whom they already have trusted relationships.

Parents were invited by family workers they knew to participate in a small focus group with a researcher about their experiences of having a child with SEND. A total of **17 parents** participated in an in-person focus group across three Contact London office areas (Ealing, Lambeth and Lewisham). Two of the focus groups involved parents from Black and mixed Black heritage backgrounds, while the third consisted of Arabic-speaking parents. Parents were offered a voucher as a thank-you for participating in the focus groups.

Interviews with SEND professionals

In addition to speaking with parents, we also sought the views of professionals supporting families with children with SEND to get a wider perspective, and to examine what good practice already exists in supporting families from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Online interviews were conducted with **9 professionals** supporting parents, including Contact support staff and representatives from three London Parent Carer Forums⁶ who had reportedly been proactive in reaching parents from different communities. Most of the professionals had their own lived experience of having a child with SEND, and included individuals from a range of ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, they were able to share insights from both personal and professional perspectives.

The parent focus groups and interviews with professionals focused on three key questions:

1. What challenges in navigating the SEND system have parents from ethnic minority backgrounds experienced?
2. What support have parents received that has been helpful?
3. How can families with a child with SEND be better supported? What additional support would be helpful?

⁶ Parent Carer Forums are groups run by parents and carers of disabled children from a local area in England. Their aim is to make sure that services in their area meet the needs of disabled children and their families. For more information, see the Contact website: <https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/parent-carer-participation/find-your-local-parent-carer-forum/>

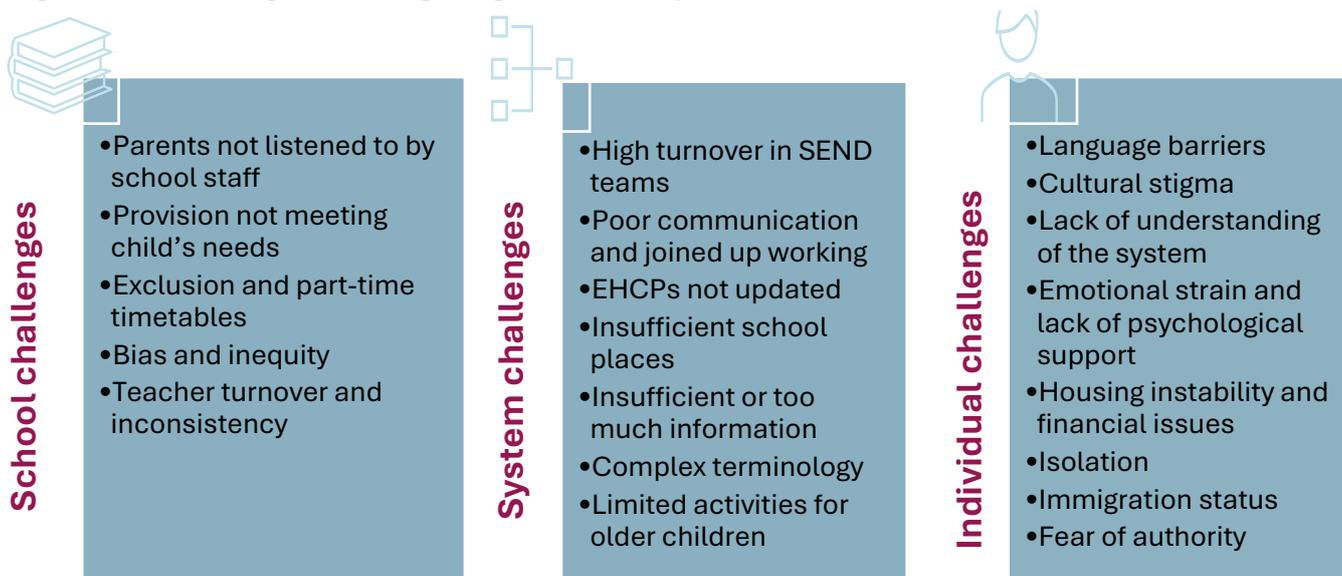
3. What barriers and challenges have parents faced in navigating the SEND system?

Parents' experiences of accessing education support for their child had been largely negative, and they felt that the system was not meeting their child's needs. Parents shared their personal accounts of their children being denied access to support or long delays for support, experiencing bullying and exclusionary practices within schools, leading to anxiety, school avoidance and a lack of educational progress. Professionals also described children '*slipping through the net*', being out of school for months or years due to a lack of appropriate provision available to them.

The journey of navigating the complex SEND system had also taken an emotional and financial toll on parents themselves. Parents described the overwhelm, isolation and emotional burden associated with trying to access education support for their children. They explained the challenge of juggling their children's needs with other factors, including work, housing difficulties, financial strain, and, in some cases, their own additional needs or ill health. Families told of their personal experiences of mental health problems and relationship breakdown caused in part by the stress associated with the '*battle*' of trying to access education support for their child. One parent stated that they were '*losing hope*' after many years of fighting to access suitable provision for their child, a sentiment shared by many of the parents involved in this research.

Many of the challenges raised by parents are common across parents, regardless of ethnicity; however, our research shows that the intersection of ethnicity with other individual variables compounds the challenges faced by SEND families. The most common challenges to accessing education support, as reported by parents and professionals, can be grouped into three main areas (as summarised in Diagram 1): school challenges, system challenges, and individual challenges. It is important to note that parents often experience a combination of barriers.

Diagram 1: Challenges of navigating the SEND system



3.1 School challenges

'Autistic families have enough daily challenges. We don't need to fight schools.' (Parent)

Although a few parents reported positive experiences within the education system, largely in the early years or specialist sectors, most of the parents we spoke to were frustrated with their child's mainstream school and described the challenges they had faced in accessing education support for their child.

It is important to acknowledge that this research has not explored the perspectives of school staff. It is clear from other recent research that schools are themselves struggling with the current SEND system, with insufficient funding and resources to meet the growing needs among pupils. Indeed, a recent survey found that 98% of school leaders in mainstream settings reported they lack the resources to meet the needs of all pupils with SEND in their schools⁷. The issues raised by parents could, therefore, be symptomatic of wider systemic problems. Nonetheless, the challenges many parents faced at their children's schools were having a detrimental impact on both children and their families, as discussed below:

- **Parents did not feel listened to by school staff** – A common complaint among parents was that staff were dismissive of their concerns about their child's needs. They felt that school staff did not trust their judgement about their child and their needs, when they, as parents, know their children best. Some parents felt there had been a breakdown in trust and communication with their child's school, and they were concerned that schools were not transparent or honest with them about their child's provision. A few parents also indicated that school staff had initially blamed them or their home circumstances for their child's behaviour rather than recognising possible additional needs. One parent, for example, explained: *'My son's old school did not help; rather, they tried to get me in trouble by calling social services.'* (Parent)
- **Schools are not meeting children's needs** – Parents commonly reported repeated refusals or delays by the school in assessing their child's needs, often resulting in a deterioration of those needs. Both parents and professionals gave examples of school staff not fully understanding conditions and misinterpreting children's behaviour. Children were said to have been *'punished for dysregulation'*, where they were excluded or received sanctions for behaviour that parents felt had arisen from their needs not being met. Even when their child had an EHCP or SEN support plan, parents reported that their child's school did not provide the specialist support they were entitled to, or that the support was inconsistent. As a result of this lack of support, often over many months or years, parents were concerned that their children were not progressing as they should or that their symptoms were getting worse.
- **Exclusion and part-time timetables in mainstream schools** – Concerningly, many of the parents we spoke to felt that their child was discriminated against by their school because of their disability. They

⁷ National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) (2024). *Pupils with special educational needs suffering amid funding crisis, say school leaders*. NAHT School Leaders' Survey Findings, published at the NAHT Annual Conference. Available at: <https://www.naht.org.uk/Advice-Support/Topics/Management/ArtMID/755/ArticleID/2411/Pupils-with-special-educational-needs-suffering-amid-funding-crisis-say-school-leaders>

gave examples of their child being excluded from everyday school activities, such as school trips and breakfast or after-school clubs, and of their child being sent home or denied full-time education. Parents commonly reported being called by their child's school within a few hours to pick up their child and take them home, because the school felt it could not meet the child's needs: *'They would tell me after three or four hours to take her back home. They would not allow her to do full-time at all.'* (Parent). This was the case even when an EHCP was in place, and reasonable adjustments for inclusion should have been made. As well as causing distress to the child, this affected parents' ability to work, with some having to give up work or reduce their hours, resulting in further financial strain.

- **Experiences of bias and inequity** – A few parents questioned whether their school's reluctance to fully support their child or recognise their needs was due to their ethnicity or personal background (e.g. single-parent family, immigration status). These parents felt that, on occasion, their child had been treated differently from other children with SEND. Differences in communication styles across communities had also caused tension, with some parents reportedly described by school staff as aggressive. The sense of suspicion, mistrust and misunderstanding among parents was also raised by two of the professionals. This highlights the importance of professionals building strong relationships with families built on mutual trust, respect and cultural understanding.
- **Teacher turnover and inconsistency** – Teacher recruitment and retention are nationwide challenges; however, they are more acute in London⁸, resulting in high staff turnover. Many SEND children rely on stability and consistency, and a few parents reported that their child found the frequent changes in school staff difficult and unsettling: *'Teachers not being steady with school... different faces, and it's kind of challenging for my son.'* (Parent)

3.2 System challenges

'Parents are just so disappointed in the system they've just lost faith.' (Professional/parent)

'You have to fight continuously...Most times doors are shut on you...The system breaks you more instead of supporting you.' (Parent)

While parents mostly emphasised the challenges they had faced with their child's school, they also raised issues with the wider SEND system, particularly their LA or local SEND services. LA SEND teams can play a key role in supporting families in navigating the SEND system; however, they too are experiencing their own difficulties. In addition to significant financial strain, many LA SEND teams face serious retention issues, partly due to the role's challenging nature. The most common complaints from parents and professionals were:

⁸ Worth, J., Rennie, C. & Lynch, S. (2018). *Teacher Supply, Retention and Mobility in London*. National Foundation for Educational Research. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/nfer_gla_teacher_supply_retention_and_mobility_in_london_2018_0.pdf

- **Frequent turnover of EHCP caseworkers and other professionals** – As a result of the high turnover within SEND teams, parents reported significant delays in accessing services and inconsistent communication, undermining their trust in professionals. Parents were often not informed about changes in key personnel, and the handover of cases to new members of staff was often poorly managed.
- **Poor communication and joined-up working** – Many parents complained about poor communication from their LA, including unanswered emails, not being kept up to date on progress with their case, being bounced around among professionals and fragmented and inconsistent information and advice. There was also reportedly a lack of consistency and joined-up working among professionals, with parents having to repeatedly explain their situation to caseworkers and other professionals. One professional highlighted that children can often *'fall through the gaps'* when they move to another LA because information is not routinely shared with the new LA, partly due to data protection regulations. There is also no fixed template for EHCPs, meaning LAs use different templates and portals for submitting applications, which can be even more confusing for parents who move between LAs. Given the housing crisis in London, moving between boroughs or out of London entirely is becoming increasingly common for families.
- **EHCPs not updated** – A common complaint from parents was that their child's EHCP was not being updated or reviewed annually, and some reported it had not been updated for many years, indicating that LAs were not meeting their statutory duties. One parent described this as a *'blockage'* in the EHCP system, which ultimately meant that their child was not getting the support they needed.
- **Insufficient school places** – Parents reported being refused a place at their school of choice or struggling to secure a place for their child at a special school. A few parents reported that their children had been out of school for an extended period, sometimes years, because the LA was unable to find a setting that met their child's needs: *'They said there's no space anywhere... I'm stuck.'* (Parent). The shortage of special school places in London⁹ means that many children with complex needs have to remain in mainstream education without adequate support, and this is having a detrimental impact on many children and young people.
- **Limited specialist provision** – The lack of specialist services available (e.g. speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and mental health services) and the long waiting lists for support mean that children have faced delays in receiving the support they need. Parents were additionally frustrated by the limited availability of affordable private therapy options, and a few parents reported that they had been left with no option but to privately pay for therapy for their child. However, this was said to be very expensive and was not a viable option for many families: *'I pay £60 per 30 minutes for speech therapy... that's why I can only do it just once a week.'* (Parent)

⁹ Miller, J., Nethercott, R., Mehew, W., Preston, S., Rossiter, P., Jones, L. & Choulerton, D. (2024). Inclusion in London's schools: a review of inclusion of young people with SEND in London. Available at: <https://www.mimeconsulting.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Inclusion-in-Londons-Schools-Report-Mime-London-Councils-20241104.pdf>

- **Insufficient or too much information** – Parents are either overwhelmed by the available SEND information or unable to find the information they need. This suggests that information is either fragmented or is not presented in a way that is accessible to all parents, perhaps due to language or literacy barriers or digital exclusion. While the SEND Local Offer¹⁰ should be a key source of information for parents, professionals noted that parents are often unaware of it. Some parents reportedly turn to social media for their information about SEND, which can often be misleading and inaccurate.
- **Complex terminology** – The SEND and wider education systems use language and processes that are unfamiliar to many parents, especially those who are new to the country or have English as an additional language (EAL). Both parents and professionals argued that the terminology, jargon and acronyms used by professionals were complex and confusing, and there was a mismatch between this professional terminology and parents' lived language.
- **Limited activities for older children** – Parents with older children with SEND were frustrated by the limited availability of extra-curricular activities for older children and young people: *'As they grow older, they have limited activities... most outdoor activities are for younger kids.'* (Parent).

3.3 Individual challenges

In addition to the school and system-wide challenges they faced in accessing education support for their children, the parents involved in this research also experienced a range of individual barriers that further hindered their ability to navigate the complex SEND system and fully advocate for their child. One professional supporting recent migrants described the myriad of challenges and trauma that many of these families have endured, including slavery, war, abusive relationships and poverty, and parents have no other family in England, adding to their isolation.

'You're just trying to survive...I felt so overwhelmed...I had very little resources.' (Parent)

Below are the main individual barriers to navigating the SEND system mentioned by parents and professionals:

- **Language barrier** – Both parents and professionals highlighted that language can be a significant barrier for families. Many ethnic minority parents in London do not speak English as a first language, which can reduce their confidence, make it harder for them to articulate their concerns, and hinder their understanding of meetings with professionals, especially when SEND jargon and acronyms are used. Even when parents can speak English, they may struggle with comprehension, particularly with SEND terminology, or be unable to write fluently in English, reducing their ability to fully explain their

¹⁰ The SEND Local Offer is an online, council-published resource providing information on services and support for children and young people (0-25) with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and their families. It covers education, health, social care, training, leisure activities, and support for preparing for adulthood. Every local authority is responsible for writing and sharing a Local Offer. They must develop the service with families, service providers and professionals and ensure it is accessible to everyone.

child's needs, for example, through an EHCP. As one professional explained: *'Even if they read it, they might not understand it because some words don't exist in their language.'* Parents often need interpreters or language support; however, these are not always offered by schools and other service providers, putting these parents at a significant disadvantage.

- **Literacy barriers and digital exclusion** – Navigating the SEND system and accessing the complex terminology used is further compounded when parents have literacy or digital access issues. As parents and professionals explained, this can create barriers in accessing information and advice, interpreting information, and advocating for their children. Some parents are also unable to access online information or manage written complaint processes, making it harder for them to seek support or challenge decisions.
- **Cultural stigma** – In some cultures, disabilities are stigmatised – there are no expectations that a child with complex needs could be educated, and they are often hidden from wider society. Parents explained that their wider family or members of their community misunderstood their child's needs, seeing it as *'a curse'* or as a result of bad behaviour or poor parenting. This led parents to avoid wider community engagement due to fear of judgement, leading to further isolation. One Black African parent with a child with autism explained the need for further education for her community: *'We are facing a lot in the community...I don't know, maybe they think it's contagious...they need to enlighten our colour more about these children... they think your child is not educated, it's not well trained, you know, you don't give a proper education to your child...our community don't really understand.'* Faced with such stigma, some parents found it difficult to accept their child's diagnosis, or were reluctant to seek help for their child, leading to delays in the child accessing support: *'When it comes to disabilities, some communities are in denial... They might not seek help because of the stigma that is surrounded with that.'* (Professional)
- **Limited understanding of SEND and the education system** – As highlighted above, some parents from ethnic minority backgrounds have limited knowledge and understanding of neurodivergence and other disabilities. A significant proportion of the parents involved in this research stated that they had never heard of conditions such as autism before their child was diagnosed, and they often lacked knowledge of key terminology, of what support exists that would help their child and how they could access it. One professional, for example, explained her initial confusion when her child was diagnosed: *'It was like a new language...you don't understand the policies, you don't understand the processes.'* Other professionals explained that this lack of knowledge means that parents are unaware of how to seek support for their child: *'Parents don't know what they don't know'; 'If you don't know what's out there, you can't ask for it'*. Similarly, unfamiliarity with the English education system also hindered some parents' ability to fully understand how to access the support that their child needed.
- **Housing instability and poverty** – A few of the parents involved in this research described the overcrowding and lack of suitable housing that they were experiencing, creating a stressful home environment. Where families have claimed asylum in this country, they are often placed in hotel accommodation. However, this environment can be hugely challenging for children with SEND, and very limited support is available to them. There were also instances of families being moved house

repeatedly by their local council. This not only caused instability, stress and isolation, but it also meant that children and young people's support was patchy and inconsistent, as the following two comments illustrate:

'Parents are placed into estates, overcrowded housing...then moved out of London entirely, losing their support network.' (Professional)

'We had a mother whose son hadn't been in school for six years...they had been moved seven times in two years.' (Professional)

- **Emotional strain and isolation** – Many parents spoke of feelings of overwhelm, stress and exhaustion caused by caring responsibilities, a lack of advice and support, and isolation. Cultural norms in some communities mean that women are less likely to leave the home, which, combined with a limited support network, makes it challenging for them to access support for both them and their children. Combined with other personal difficulties, such as mental health problems or ill health, and their own additional needs, parents' capacity to engage with support was often limited.
- **Mistrust of services and professionals** – As one professional explained: *'There's a lack of trust...a generational lack of trust that's come down from upbringing and cultural norms.'* This mistrust is especially deep-rooted among certain communities: *'First and foremost...is that sense of distrust with professionals. And it's a warranted, deep distrust from historical bad treatment.'* (Professional). Examples were given by parents of dismissive or culturally insensitive responses from professionals, and they were particularly fearful of social services' involvement, as parents felt they would be scrutinised or blamed for their child's behaviour or condition.
- **Fear of, or deference to authority** – In some communities, it is not culturally acceptable to challenge professionals or those deemed to be in authority. Some parents are therefore reluctant to question school or LA staff or challenge unfair decisions about their children's education. This is particularly the case among women in some cultures, who find it difficult to have their voice heard and ultimately advocate for their child: *'She didn't want to question professionals because in her culture you listen to professionals... She thought she couldn't ask.'* (Professional)
- **Immigration status** – Families with uncertain visa status held additional fears about challenging authority, making them feel isolated and vulnerable and unable to access support for their child. One parent we spoke to felt that the school had exploited their vulnerability: *'Immigration is one of the biggest barriers...The school took advantage because we didn't have our papers.'* (Parent).

4. What support have parents found helpful?

Amid the personal and systemic challenges parents faced in navigating the SEND system, there were glimmers of light from organisations and individuals who provided much-needed support and guidance to families. Access to such support was hugely valued by parents, as it not only helped them to understand the complexities of the SEND system but also made them feel less alone. As one parent stated, *'I am just a parent. I have to fight, but I cannot do it on my own.'* (Parent)

4.1 Parents' views on support

Parents gave examples of the support they had found particularly useful, as summarised below:

- **Peer support and parent networks** – Connecting with other parents was seen as a lifeline for many, helping reduce isolation, build confidence in navigating the complex SEND system, and get advice on accessing support for their child. Parents described how reassuring it was *'meeting parents and sharing experiences...having people that understand me,'* while others emphasised how much they had learned from other parents going through the same experience: *'I met another parent who had similar challenges... she told me how to apply for EHCP.'* Meeting other parents further along in their SEND journey was particularly valued, because *'there is real power in seeing life will be ok.'* (Professional).
- **Short breaks and respite care** – Parents spoke of the exhaustion of having to 'fight' the SEND system, while supporting their children with complex needs, and in some cases struggling with their own additional needs or ill health. A few parents had received respite care, which they felt had provided essential relief and renewed their energy to support their children.
- **Early SEND diagnosis** – Parents who reported that their child's additional needs had been diagnosed early (e.g., when they were in early years or Reception), generally reported that support was in place early, that children were achieving better outcomes, and they were more satisfied with the support their child had received. This is consistent with Contact's earlier research (O'Donnell, 2025), highlighting the need for more SEND training for staff in the early years sector.
- **Specialist provision for children** – In some parents' experience, moving their child from mainstream to specialist schooling has improved their outcomes. These parents felt that their child's special school had a better understanding of their needs, and had the expertise and resources to fully support their child, as the following comments from parents illustrate:

'When she moved to the special school, they started to understand her and put strategies in place.' (Parent)

'The good thing is my son joined the special school for autistic kids. He was in year 1 when he joined. They supported him with extra speech and language therapist, OT and sensory issues. They are really helpful and they understand his needs. They give us tips on how we can deal with him.' (Parent)

- **Advice and guidance from Contact** – All the parents involved in this research spoke highly of the support they had received from Contact, with one parent stating that *‘they are always there to help when I call.’* The individualised support provided by family workers was particularly well regarded, while coffee mornings and other peer support events were also seen as valuable sources of information and support for parents. Contact staff had also reportedly provided practical advice and guidance to parents, including helping them write letters, interpret EHCPs, find solicitors to support Tribunal cases, and provide strategies for managing children’s behaviour.
- **Awareness sessions for parents** – Given the lack of prior knowledge of SEND among many parents, sessions or workshops offered by schools or other organisations were much appreciated. One parent explained that *‘they offered me a course for myself and my husband... educating about autism. There were sessions at school as well’*, which she had found informative and useful.

Other helpful sources of support mentioned by parents included social workers, mental health support for themselves and transition preparation for their child.

Parents reported that their situation had improved due to the support they received. They felt more informed and empowered and spoke of action they had taken to improve their child’s provision, e.g., making complaints to their child’s school, taking their LA to Tribunal, and changing their child’s school. One parent described the transformative journey she had gone on as a result of being empowered by Contact. She explained that when she first reached out to Contact, she did not know anything about SEND, but that *‘[Name of family worker] told me, don't stop, keep pressuring... that's when the information started flowing in.’* This parent is now supporting other SEND parents through peer networks and is engaged in strategic-level SEND parent consultations with the LA, highlighting the positive potential of parental support and empowerment.

4.2 Professionals’ views on support

Reflecting on their organisation's work supporting SEND families, professionals highlighted the support they considered to be particularly beneficial for parents. One professional, for example, emphasised the importance of being *‘a listening ear’* for parents, while another stated that *‘we empower parents by giving them tools.’* They added that this helps to build parents’ confidence and empowers them to advocate for their child.

Both Contact staff and Parent Carer Forum representatives described the range of support they offer SEND parents. These include a mix of one-to-one support, group information sessions, including talks by professionals (such as educational psychologists and social workers), and social or well-being activities such as coffee mornings or yoga sessions, designed to offer more holistic support and connect parents: *‘We bring parents together to offer each other peer support, share information and bring that parent voice to the local area.’* (Professional)

While community-specific sessions for parents were considered helpful for reaching families who do not traditionally engage with services, the professionals we spoke to emphasised the benefits of having universal events for all families. This can foster shared learning across communities and help prevent segregation.

5. How can SEND families be better supported?

Parents in this study described the emotional and financial burden of navigating a complex, resource-constrained SEND system, often while managing additional pressures such as work, housing instability, immigration issues, and their own health needs. While proposed national reforms to the SEND system have recently been published, it will likely take time for them to reach children and their families. Meanwhile, parents urgently need practical support to mitigate against the barriers and challenges within a SEND system in crisis. Such support, delivered through schools, LAs, and the community and voluntary sector, can play a critical role in empowering families.

When asked what support they thought was most critical for SEND families, parents emphasised the importance of the following:

- **Professionals should listen to parents** and take their concerns about their children's needs seriously – parents want schools to listen, collaborate, and act promptly.
- **Better communication and accountability** from schools and LAs, ensuring timely information and responses to parents' communications.
- **Improved information and guidance** at an earlier stage, with accessible information about parents' rights, EHCP processes, and available services.
- **More inclusive school environments** that provide reasonable adjustments to enable children with SEND to fully access the curriculum and the wider life of the school.
- **More special school places and resources** so that parents can choose a local school that can meet their child's needs.
- **Improved SEND training for school staff** to aid earlier identification of SEND and improved support for children.
- **More respite care and mental health and emotional support** for children & parents to help them cope with the challenges of living with additional needs.
- **Appropriate play spaces for SEND children, along with more activities for older children and young people.**
- **Better transition planning and preparation for adulthood** – structured programmes to help children and young people adapt socially and emotionally.
- **More peer support networks** to enable parents to connect with and learn from other SEND families.
- **Language support and interpreters** to help families understand their rights and communicate their child's needs.
- **Practical support for families facing immigration and housing challenges.**

Professionals expressed similar views to parents on how SEND families could be better supported, but they also made the following recommendations:

- **Flexible, culturally sensitive approaches** – Professionals working with and supporting families require an understanding of cultural norms across communities (e.g., gender dynamics, communication styles, attitudes towards disability) and the lived experience of parent carers. Families need consistent, reliable support from professionals, so they feel safe enough to engage.

The professionals involved in this study emphasised that trust is built slowly and can easily be undermined by insensitive behaviour or dismissive responses.

- **Better, earlier, clearer information** – Reaching parents at an early stage in their SEND journey, for example, through easily accessible information in community spaces (e.g. GP surgeries), and provision of information packs or sessions at diagnosis, would reduce the strain on parents and reduce the likelihood of them reaching crisis point. Professionals emphasised the need for:
 - Information and guidance at key touch-points
 - EHCP guidance
 - Step-by-step explanations of SEND processes
 - Clear fact sheets in simple, jargon-free language.
 - More non-written information, such as videos and other visual tools, to counter language and literacy barriers
 - Translated materials
 - Consistent messaging across professionals.
- **Inclusive, open spaces for parents to meet** – Develop ‘safe spaces’ in the community where SEND parents can connect and share experiences: *‘Just knowing that there are other people who get it really helps families feel less isolated’* (Professional). Inclusive, open spaces where parents from different communities can integrate were seen as preferable to targeted sessions as they enable parents to learn from the *‘richness’* of other parents’ experiences: *‘It’s about creating inclusive spaces and letting trust grow’* (Professional).
- **Empowerment and confidence-building** – For some parents, information on a leaflet or website is not enough; they need more practical support, signposting and reassurance. Genuine and respectful listening and relationship building are key elements of empowering parents and encouraging self-advocacy: *‘We want parents to learn and feel confident... It’s easy for us to do it for them, but they need to know they can do it’* (Professional).
- **Community outreach and trust-building** – Some communities are very ‘tight-knit’ and are more reluctant to engage with services. Taking information into communities, or to families who are more marginalised (e.g. parents whose children are out of school) is key, but it takes time and effort: *‘Outreach to different communities is a long-term commitment...it’s trust-building, listening, going to events’* (Professional). Professionals felt that organic growth, for example, through community networks and churches, can be more effective than formal outreach. They highlighted the need for charities and voluntary sector organisations to collaborate with community groups to connect these communities with professionals with SEND expertise.
- **Holistic support for parents** – Professionals should understand the additional challenges that parents may be facing, such as immigration or housing difficulties, physical or mental health problems, and provide appropriate holistic support. Emotional support, for example, can improve parents’ well-being and reduce isolation, while practical help and advice (e.g. benefits advice) can help improve family stability and reduce stress, giving parents more mental capacity to engage with the SEND system.
- **Diversity within support organisations and professionals** – Having professionals from a diverse range of backgrounds can help parents feel more comfortable engaging with services: *‘People want to see people that look like them...they feel there’s more of an understanding. That’s the reality’* (Professional). This is even more essential for building trust with families from racially minoritised communities.

- **Language support** – This should include translation of written materials, support for meetings, and production of written content. However, a few professionals highlighted the logistical difficulties of providing language support, including the presence of different dialects within the same language, a lack of funding, and limited availability of interpreters. Professionals noted that, ideally, the people supporting families with language skills should also have SEND expertise. A few examples were given of families supported by well-meaning advocates from their own communities who lacked the necessary SEND knowledge, resulting in confusion and delays in accessing appropriate support services.
- **Coaching for parents in communication and advocacy** – Alongside training for school staff and other professionals, one professional suggested that parents would benefit from coaching on how to approach schools, how to get the most out of meetings, and how to communicate with schools and LAs.

6. Conclusion

The third year of this Contact/City Bridge Foundation research study set out to examine how ethnicity and other parental factors shape families' experiences of the SEND system in London. Parents' accounts reveal a consistent picture of unmet needs and fragmented provision, exacerbated where families face additional disadvantages. For many families, inadequate support has hindered children's academic progress and emotional well-being, with parents describing distressing incidents of bullying, exclusion, and missed opportunities due to insufficient reasonable adjustments and inconsistent support.

Navigating the SEND system has also taken a profound toll on parents, who describe the emotional, physical, and financial impacts on their families. Many of the challenges faced by parents are shared across communities; however, these challenges were often compounded by language barriers, cultural stigma, limited trust in services, and fear of authority. These intersecting disadvantages can deepen inequalities for ethnic minority families, highlighting the need for more inclusive, proactive and culturally responsive support across the SEND system.

Reform of the SEND system in England is urgently needed and is underway. System-wide improvements are essential to reduce bureaucracy and the complexity of the SEND system, and to remove the need for parents to 'fight' to get the support that their child is legally entitled to. Yet, given the scale and complexity of the required change, it will likely take significant time for reforms to lead to meaningful improvements in families' day-to-day experiences. In the meantime, children and their families need immediate emotional and practical support. They require clear, accessible information, a strong understanding of their rights, and guidance on how to advocate effectively for their child within a complex and often overwhelming system.

The reality of the current SEND system is that persistent advocacy remains essential for many families. This requires confidence, knowledge of the SEND system and the communication skills needed to articulate their child's needs. Parents, therefore, need ongoing information and guidance to do this throughout their child's education and beyond, underscoring the importance of support and empowerment for SEND parents. For families facing additional barriers, such as language or literacy barriers, financial hardship, or unfamiliarity with the English education system, this support becomes even more vital.

This research also showed the transformative effect of high-quality information, advice and guidance. Parents who had been supported early, provided with clear information, and empowered to advocate for their child reported far more positive experiences and greater satisfaction with their child's current provision. Parents and professionals alike highlighted a range of practical ways to strengthen the SEND system for all families, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds who experience multiple disadvantages. These include strengthening early intervention pathways, improving cultural competence and enhancing community-based support to ensure equitable access to SEND provision.

Next steps for the research

The fourth and final report (spring 2026) will synthesise the insights from all three years of this research study. It will set out detailed recommendations for policymakers and practitioners on how SEND parents can be better supported, with a particular focus on those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Appendix 1: Research Questions

Over-arching research questions:

- What are the experiences of education for London families with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (aged 5-18 years) from black and ethnic minority groups?
- Specifically, what are parents' experiences of identification/diagnosis of SEND, participation in decision making, the EHCP process, SEND appeal/Tribunal process, their children receiving the support they need/are entitled to, and support for transition between different phases of education?
- To what extent are there differences in the experiences of education for London families from different ethnic groups? What are the factors affecting this?

Specific research questions:

- To what extent are children with SEND from black and ethnic minority groups receiving the support they need/are entitled to? What are the factors facilitating/hindering this?
- To what extent are families with children with SEND from black and minority ethnic groups facing barriers in accessing appropriate support? What are these barriers, and how can they be overcome?
- To what extent are barriers impacting some ethnic groups more than others? What are the factors affecting this?
- What does high-quality SEND provision/support look like for families? What factors do parents feel should be in place?
- What support around education and learning have London parents found helpful for their children (e.g., from local authorities, schools, community organisations and charities)? What further support would families find helpful?
- What are London families' experiences of the support provided by Contact and what areas for improvement would they recommend?
- How can statutory services/policy makers and community organisations/charities improve their support and help families to overcome barriers to accessing SEND support?

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For more information about the support available to families of children with SEND, please visit Contact's website: www.contact.org.uk