

O'Donnell  
Research & Evaluation



CITY BRIDGE  
FOUNDATION

contact *For families  
with disabled children*

# **Bridging the gap: Recommendations for supporting London's ethnic minority families to navigate the SEND system**



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### About Contact

Contact is a UK charity dedicated to supporting families with disabled children, helping them feel valued, informed, confident and connected. They provide expert advice, practical information, and emotional support through services such as a free helpline, local teams across the UK, workshops, and online resources. Contact also brings families together through events and networks, empowering them to take action on issues that affect their lives.

Contact provides a place-based family support service in several London boroughs (currently Ealing, Hounslow, Lambeth, and Lewisham). These London-based projects support parents of disabled children and those with additional needs who live in the relevant local authority. Contact's London teams help families with issues similar to Contact's national projects, but they are embedded in the community and are able to reach local families who are more marginalised. They offer face-to-face appointments and group sessions, as well as opportunities for families to meet in local settings to socialise and share experiences. Typically, 60-80% of the families they support are from ethnic minority backgrounds, and they also work with an increasing number of parent volunteers supporting different language groups. Contact's London teams are able to build trust and relationships with families over time, as children grow and their needs evolve. They also develop close working relationships with local authorities' (LA) SEN teams, children centres, special schools, health services and EY providers. This in turn facilitates a high amount of outreach work, ensuring Contact can reach parents as early as possible in those communities. Knowledge of local services, school provision and the wider voluntary sector offer can prove vital in ensuring families are able to receive holistic support around their children's needs. Contact's community-based services are well placed to provide the holistic, person-centred advice and support that the most vulnerable families need. For further information about Contact, visit <https://contact.org.uk/>

### About City Bridge Foundation

The City Bridge Foundation is one of London's oldest charitable institutions, supporting and maintaining five of London's major Thames crossings, while also serving as the city's largest independent charity funder. Through income generated from responsible investment and asset management, the Foundation awards grants to organisations across Greater London working to tackle inequality, disadvantage and injustice. For further information about City Bridge Foundation, visit: <https://www.citybridgefoundation.org.uk/>

## 1. Introduction

This research report is the fourth and final report produced by O'Donnell Research & Evaluation for a three-year project commissioned by Contact and funded by the City Bridge Foundation<sup>1</sup>. The research explored the experiences of education for London families from ethnic minority backgrounds with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

### 1.1 The national and London SEND context

The SEND system in England is experiencing unprecedented strain. Need for support has risen sharply, the complexity of children and young people's needs is increasing, and local authorities (LAs) and schools are contending with severe financial pressures. This growth is reflected in London, where the cohort of school pupils with SEND increased by 21% between 2019 and 2024, to more than 250,000 pupils (17% of the London pupil population). At least seven London boroughs have more than a fifth of school pupils identified with SEND (Miller *et al.*, 2024)<sup>2</sup>, and financial and capacity challenges in London's school system are adding further pressure to the SEND system.

Workforce shortages compound these pressures. Schools face difficulties in recruiting and retaining SEND-trained staff, while LA SEND teams experience high turnover, inconsistent casework management, and challenges in meeting statutory timeframes. Specialist services such as speech and language therapy and occupational therapy are over-subscribed, resulting in long waits and unmet needs.

Despite the Children and Families Act (2014)<sup>3</sup>'s intention to create a more child-centred, equitable, and accessible system, the SEND system is failing due to poor and inconsistent implementation of the 2014 reforms. This research report comes just after the February 2026 publication of the UK government's White Paper *'Every Child Achieving and Thriving'*<sup>4</sup>, which sets out a significant programme of reform to improve outcomes for children with SEND. Central to these reforms is a shift toward earlier intervention, stronger inclusion, tackling disadvantage and a more coherent, multi-agency approach to support.

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<sup>1</sup> The three previous research reports are available on the Contact website:

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>

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>

O'Donnell, L. (2026). *Hidden inequalities in education: Experiences of London's ethnic minority families navigating the SEND system*. Available at: <https://contact.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Contact-Final-Year-3-Report-09.03.26.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> 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>

<sup>3</sup> UK Government: Children and Families Act 2014:  
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/06/contents/enacted>

<sup>4</sup> 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>.

## 1.2 Rationale for the research

Given the increasing ethnic diversity in the UK, particularly in London, it is crucial to understand the varied experiences of different communities to ensure that SEND provision is equitable. However, it is worth noting that the White Paper does not explicitly reference the ethnicity of children with SEND and their families. Across England, there is long-standing evidence of ethnic disproportionality in SEND identification, access to support, and outcomes (e.g., Hutchison, 2021<sup>5</sup>). However, the intersection of ethnicity and SEND is complex, and the reasons behind ethnic disproportionality are not clear. Relatively little research in the UK explores how ethnicity intersects with families' lived experience of the SEND system, particularly from the perspective of parents themselves.

Given that parents should be at the heart of the SEND system, it is essential that their voices are heard and listened to. This research project sought to fill the evidence gap by gathering feedback directly from parents from a range of communities across London about their child's education.

This final report brings together the overarching insights across all three years of the research and examines how SEND experiences are shaped by the intersection of ethnicity, poverty, language, and systemic inequities. It aims to provide a robust evidence base for improving policy and practice in London and beyond, and presents seven recommendations focused primarily on making the SEND system more equitable for families from ethnic minority backgrounds.

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<sup>5</sup> Hutchison, J. (2021). *Identifying pupils with special educational needs and disabilities*. Education Policy Institute.

## 2. About the research

This report synthesises the findings from a three-year research project conducted between December 2023 and March 2026.

### 2.1 Research aims

The overall aim of the research was to examine the experiences of education for London families with children with SEND from ethnic minority backgrounds, and to explore any inequalities in experiences between ethnic groups. Importantly, the research sought to hear directly from parents about their experiences accessing education support for their children with SEND, and to understand how statutory services and charities such as Contact can improve their support for families. The research questions developed at the outset of the project are presented in Appendix 1.

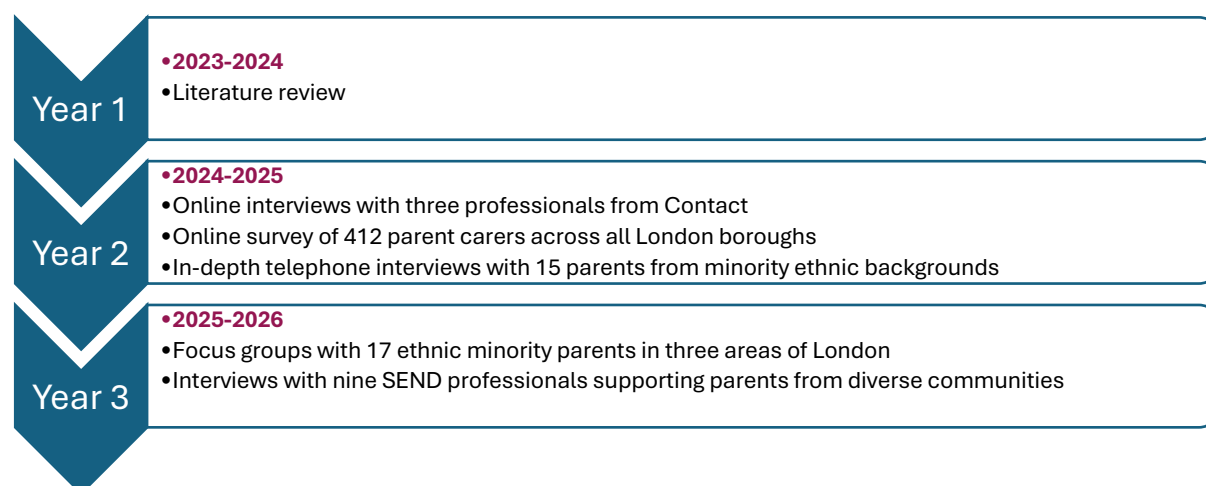
Across the three phases, the research has explored parents' experiences of navigating the SEND system, with a particular focus on families from ethnic minority backgrounds, including those with additional vulnerabilities such as English as an additional language (EAL), housing insecurity, or recent migration. We recognise the heterogeneity across and within ethnic minority groups, and throughout the project, we have sought to include parents from different communities to gather a range of perspectives and experiences.

### 2.2 Methodology

This mixed-methods study was conducted by an independent researcher in partnership with a Project Group established to co-produce and guide the research. The Project Group involved key frontline staff from Contact and parents with lived experience of SEND from diverse ethnic backgrounds in London. The purpose of the group was to oversee the research aims and ensure the direction and methodology of the research were shaped by the parent voice.

Diagram 1 summarises the research activities carried out in each year of the study. Further information about the methodology from each year of the project is presented in Appendix 2.

**Diagram 1: Research methodology**



### 3. Key findings from the research

#### 3.1 Universal challenges faced by all families

Navigating the SEND system has taken a profound toll on the parents involved in our research, who described the emotional, physical, and financial impacts on their families. Across all ethnic groups and phases of the study, parents reported common difficulties in navigating the SEND system. These challenges form the backdrop against which ethnic disparities must be understood:

- Long delays in assessment, diagnosis and support
- Inconsistent or insufficient provision in mainstream schools
- Poor communication from schools and LAs
- Frequent changes in case-workers and school staff
- Limited availability of specialist services and special school places
- Burdensome processes requiring significant parental advocacy
- Negative impacts on children's mental health, behaviour and well-being
- Emotional exhaustion, financial strain and relationship stress among parents

The SEND system's complexity means that nearly all parents described the process as overwhelming and adversarial, often taking years before their child's needs were recognised or met.

*'Long delays, poor communication and constant advocating to ensure provision is being implemented. It has been relentless.'* (Parent, Mixed ethnicity, 'other' origin)

*'Took us 6 years to get reasonable adjustments in mainstream school. However, the school does not have the capacities to check and review the adjustments they put in are working for the individual. Very frustrating! This process is hindering my son to thrive in school.'* (Parent, Chinese)

*'It was a wake-up call that SEND laws, regulations, policies are in place but that doesn't mean institutions follow and implement them. In mainstream...parents are left defeated, left to think that we have no choice or recourse, and tend to accept that what is happening is their fault.'* (Parent, Asian)

#### 3.2 Additional barriers linked to ethnicity

Many of the challenges faced by parents are shared across communities; however, these difficulties were often compounded by language barriers, cultural stigma, mistrust of services, fear of authority, racial bias, limited understanding of the education system, and wider socio-economic vulnerabilities. These intersecting disadvantages can deepen inequalities for ethnic minority families, resulting in delays to support and unequal outcomes for children and young people. These findings highlight the need for more inclusive, proactive and culturally responsive support across the SEND system.

*'In African backgrounds, a lot of people don't really want to accept that this is what's going on. They don't want to accept that label.'* (Parent, Black African)

*'In terms of my daughter's needs being picked up early enough, I do think there's been racial bias. She's always been seen as an aggressive child. Now my daughter is mixed race. She's half black, half Asian. She looks black... She would be perceived to be aggressive, defiant, not motivated... but it's her being dysregulated.'* (Parent, Mixed ethnic background)

*'If English is not [your] first language, completing paperwork and being able to advocate for your child is very challenging.'* (Parent, Indian)

### 3.3 What effective support looks like for SEND families

Parents and professionals consistently identified features of support that they felt would improve experiences and outcomes:

- High-quality interventions that meet the needs of children
- Good communication and partnership working with parents
- Culturally-sensitive practice and a workforce that reflects the communities served
- Accessible, jargon-free information available early in the process
- Interpretation and translation support are provided routinely
- Peer support networks and safe community spaces, reducing isolation
- Staff training on SEND, cultural competence, trauma and bias
- Strong, consistent relationships with trusted professionals
- Advocacy support to help parents navigate appeals, EHCP processes and statutory rights.

Where these features were present, families described transformative improvements in confidence, understanding, and their children's well-being and outcomes.

*'For a parent or carer with a SEND young person or child, you almost need someone to coordinate things for you. Because it's a full-time job trying to keep on top of everything. So having one key person to kind of signpost you and guide you through the process is going to be very reassuring.'* (Parent, Mixed ethnicity)

*'Having a support hub specifically for these families with these needs, for example, representatives from school once a month; open session for questions, queries etc; help with form completing...Advice hubs provide support for the local community in areas such as housing, Welfare, Immigration, benefits, and debt. Why not one for SEND support?'* (Parent, 'other' Asian background)

## 4. Recommendations for supporting SEND families from ethnic minority backgrounds

The following recommendations outline practical, systemic and cultural changes needed to create a more equitable and responsive SEND system for all families, with a focus on those from ethnic minority backgrounds. The seven recommendations have been developed in partnership with the Project Group and are based on feedback from parent carers and SEND professionals about the barriers families face in navigating the SEND system and the key improvements they would like to see. They are also set within the context of the recent White Paper, *'Every Child Achieving and Thriving'*, and propose ways the reforms could go further to improve the system for families.

- 1 Improve the consistency and accessibility of SEND information and advice for all families
- 2 Strengthen culturally competent practice across the SEND workforce
- 3 Invest in holistic, community-based emotional and practical support for parents
- 4 Expand specialist provision and early identification and assessment pathways, so children receive timely, appropriate support
- 5 Ensure genuinely inclusive mainstream school environments where children with SEND are not excluded from education and school life
- 6 Promote co-production and engagement with SEND families from diverse backgrounds
- 7 Improve accountability within the SEND system, so the system is less adversarial for parents, and create clear processes for parents to hold schools and LAs to account

## 1. Improve the consistency and accessibility of SEND information and advice for all families

### Why is this important?

Given the complexity of the SEND system, parents require high-quality, timely information and advice to help them ensure their child is receiving the education support they are entitled to. However, not all parents are receiving the information and support they need, with families feeling *'left to fend for themselves'*. In our Year 2 survey, 50% of parents disagreed/strongly disagreed that they had been given enough information about the education support their child is entitled to, and 51% disagreed/strongly disagreed that they had been given enough information about *how to access* education support. Where information is available, parents often find it difficult to understand or find it too overwhelming.

Furthermore, the intersection of being from an ethnic minority background, combined with language barriers, literacy issues, and unfamiliarity with SEND terminology, has left many parents unable to comprehend their child's diagnosis, understand meetings, advocate for their child, or even realise what support is available. There is a clear need to improve the consistency and accessibility of information and advice for SEND families, to ensure it is accessible to parents from diverse backgrounds and available when they need it.

### Who is responsible?

- Department for Education (DfE)
- LAs
- Education settings
- Charities and non-statutory organisations

### What is needed?

- Improve the visibility and usability of the Local Offer:
  - DfE to publish a template or best practice for the Local Offer, which can be tailored by LAs.
  - Co-produce Local Offer platforms with parents from diverse communities (for example, through Parent Carer Forums) to ensure they are accessible and up to date.
  - Insert a language/translation option on Local Offer websites.
  - Provide hard-copy or alternative options for families experiencing digital exclusion.
  - Develop videos, infographics and audio guides to support parents with low literacy or digital confidence.
- A framework for accessible SEND information, requiring LAs to provide:
  - plain-language guidance, with less jargon and fewer acronyms
  - translated materials in key community languages
  - non-written formats (videos, visual guides, voice notes, infographics)
  - a clear, step-by-step guide to the SEND system and the EHCP process, with additional guides to support this information
  - information and guidance explaining the early signs of SEND, provided at first concern and whilst children are waiting for assessment
  - referral or sign-posting to local and national organisations supporting families with disabled children.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘SEND Information Packs’ given to families at first concern, diagnosis and at key stages in their child’s education journey.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distribute information proactively at key touchpoints such as GP practices, community centres, nurseries, faith groups and parent-and-toddler settings.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requirements for schools and LAs to adopt simple and consistent SEND terminology and to provide key documentation in families’ home languages.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in SEND-specialist interpreters, not just general interpreters, to support families with meetings, assessments and tribunals. LAs and schools to offer interpreters proactively for assessments, meetings with parents, EHCP reviews and SEND Tribunal preparation, not only on request.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in community, culturally-sensitive advice and advocacy services to help families from ethnic minority backgrounds fully access and understand SEND information and advice.</li> </ul>

## 2. Strengthen culturally competent practice across the SEND workforce

### Why is this important?

Across our research, we found that, while many of the difficulties in navigating the SEND system are shared across families from different communities, parents from ethnic minority backgrounds often face additional barriers, linked to language, cultural stigma, mistrust of services, and fear of challenging authority. These factors commonly delay the identification of children’s additional needs and reduce parents’ confidence in advocating for their children. Parents from ethnic minority backgrounds also reported being dismissed, misheard, misjudged and in some cases discriminated against by school staff and other professionals.

Wider research shows significant, long-standing, and consistent differences in the rates at which children from different ethnic minority backgrounds are identified as having SEND and the extent of support they receive. While the reasons for this ethnic disproportionality are complex, professionals working with children and families with SEND need to ensure that they are challenging unconscious bias and adopting culturally sensitive practice.

### Who is responsible?

- DfE
- LAs
- Education settings
- Charities and non-statutory organisations

What is needed?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural competency training for teachers, SENDCOs, EHCP caseworkers, social workers and other professionals supporting parents, including health, focused specifically on:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Understanding cultural norms, communication styles and cultural barriers to engagement, SEND disclosure and diagnosis.</li> <li>○ Recognising and challenging unconscious bias.</li> <li>○ Identifying how discrimination can appear (e.g., mislabelling behaviour, lower expectations, mistrust).</li> <li>○ Understanding the intersection of SEND, ethnicity, poverty, immigration and trauma.</li> <li>○ Recognising the importance of effective communication and partnership working with parents (e.g. how to listen to parents and build trust).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance for schools on preventing and reducing bias in the identification, referral pathways, and behavioural assessments of children from ethnic minority communities.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in a more diverse SEND workforce that reflects the community they are supporting, including family support workers from a range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Best practice guidance for professionals, co-produced by parents from diverse communities, on the key principles for supporting children and families, including active listening and having a non-judgemental attitude towards different cultures and backgrounds.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage reflective practice among professionals through supervision, coaching, and case reviews that examine how race, culture and SEND intersect.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding for long-term outreach work to build trust and community connections that lead to genuine parental engagement in services.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accountability mechanisms (for example, Ofsted and LA SEND reviews) to ensure that cultural competence is not optional but embedded in everyday practice.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer community-based SEND workshops in partnership with culturally-specific organisations and faith groups to improve understanding of SEND processes.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit and train cultural liaison or link workers who can bridge the gap between education and health services, and community members, providing community outreach and supporting families from ethnic minority backgrounds in navigating the SEND system.</li> </ul>

### 3. Invest in holistic, community-based emotional and practical support for parents

#### Why is this important?

Navigating the complex SEND system is often stressful, confusing and overwhelming for families, and throughout our research, parents described the detrimental impact on them and their children. Ethnicity often intersects with other challenges, such as insecure housing and poverty, exacerbating difficulties for families, and parents were also often dealing with their own health or mental health problems or additional needs. Parent carers described themselves as *'exhausted, burnt out and mentally drained'*. Peer networks and holistic, family-centred support through community organisations were repeatedly identified by parents

as transformative, highlighting the importance of such support in preventing children and their parents from reaching crisis point.

The recent White Paper acknowledges the importance of supporting families in a more holistic, joined-up, and emotionally supportive way, and proposes rebuilding public services around the needs of children and families, including Best Start Family Hubs that offer integrated family support from birth, and expanded mental health support teams serving both children and families. We welcome this approach and recommend that the reforms view such holistic support through a cultural lens and ensure that practice is culturally sensitive and tailored to the needs of families from differing ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Our research has demonstrated that support that is trusted, culturally sensitive and empowering makes a substantial difference to families.

### Who is responsible?

- LAs
- Charities and non-statutory organisations
- Funders and commissioners

What is needed?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term, ring-fenced funding for trusted community-based organisations (including Contact) to deliver:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ peer-support groups</li> <li>○ culturally tailored, long-term outreach</li> <li>○ practical help (form filling, benefits, EHCP preparation)</li> <li>○ well-being and mental health support.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop targeted access routes to poverty-mitigation supports (breakfast clubs, Best Start Family Hubs, childcare entitlements) specifically for disadvantaged families, including SEND families in minority communities.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase access to advice and advocacy support:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Fund specialist SEND advice and advocacy services, particularly those with bilingual staff and lived experience of SEND.</li> <li>○ Ensure parents can access support in preparing for meetings, interpreting reports, writing contributions to EHCPs and appealing decisions.</li> <li>○ Develop coordinated support (housing, immigration advice, financial support) in partnership with voluntary sector organisations.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase targeted mental health support for parent carers (1:1 and group counselling) and investment in short breaks and respite care.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in early help and proactive outreach before parents reach crisis point.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A requirement for LA services (including Best Start Family Hubs) to partner with trusted community groups, faith organisations and grassroots networks who can reach parents who fear or mistrust statutory services. LAs should also review how their services are used by under-represented communities.</li> </ul>

## 4. Expand specialist provision and early identification and assessment pathways, so children receive timely, appropriate support

### Why is this important?

Parents described long delays to assessment and diagnosis, inconsistent or low-quality support, limited availability of specialist provision and unmet need. In our Year 2 survey, 70% of parents reported that they had found it 'very difficult' or 'difficult' to access education support for their child, and more than half (51%) of parents reported that their child's education setting had not put in place the support their child was entitled to. The result was children with unmet needs and, in many cases, a worsening of children's health and mental health.

Early diagnosis of children and young people was consistently linked to better outcomes for children and greater satisfaction among parents. However, evidence indicates that children from certain ethnic minority backgrounds often experience slower or reduced rates of identification (e.g., Strand and Lindoff, 2018).<sup>6</sup> Early intervention can reduce the need for costly SEND Tribunal appeals, crisis exclusions and out-of-area placements and ultimately improve outcomes for children and their families.

We welcome the recent White Paper's clear emphasis on early needs assessment and its commitment to rebuilding services around schools and expanding family hubs. However, we recommend that such reforms be further developed to ensure that early identification and assessment pathways are culturally competent and responsive to the needs of an increasingly diverse pupil population.

### Who is responsible?

- DfE
- LAs

### What is needed?

- Investment in mandatory SEND training for early years, school and further education staff, to support earlier diagnosis of additional needs and equip staff to have sensitive conversations with concerned parents, support parent understanding of assessment processes, and signpost available help for families.
- Improve the cultural competence of early identification:
  - Provide comprehensive training for early years staff, teachers, SENCOs, Educational Psychologists and other relevant professionals on how SEND may present differently across cultures and ethnic groups.
  - Ensure screening tools and assessment practices are culturally responsive and sensitive to diverse communication styles or behaviours.
- Establish a multicultural, inclusive pool of SEND professionals, in line with the White Paper's 'Experts at Hand' approach, who can be brought into education settings to support early identification and

<sup>6</sup> Strand, S. and Lindorff, A (2018). Ethnic disproportionality in the identification of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in England: Extent, causes and consequences. University of Oxford: [https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Executive-Summary\\_2018-12-20.pdf](https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Executive-Summary_2018-12-20.pdf)

<p>collaborate with teams in responding to the needs of an increasingly diverse pupil population. Ensure that these multi-agency teams and other SEND professionals receive training to recognise cultural variations in child development and family practices.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-locate SEND and early-help services in Best Start Family Hubs, ensuring outreach to ethnic minority communities through multilingual staff and community partnerships.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A commitment to quicker identification, with LAs required to set locally agreed benchmarks for maximum waiting times for early assessments and report identification data disaggregated by ethnicity and EAL status.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address shortages of specialist professionals (e.g., Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language therapists) by exploring pooled borough resources, increased commissioning, and targeted recruitment of bilingual specialists.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritise early assessment and culturally-inclusive early intervention programmes for families at risk of disadvantage, including those with insecure housing, those newly arrived in the UK, families with English as an additional language and those who are socially isolated.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Settings and services to prioritise a child-centred approach to decisions on when to offer early interventions (e.g., Speech and Language Therapy) for children whose first language is not English.</li> </ul>

## 5. Ensure genuinely inclusive mainstream school environments where children with SEND are not excluded from education and school life

### Why is this important?

Many parents reported that their child had been excluded from everyday school activities or had been forced onto reduced timetables without formal process because the school was unable to meet their child's needs. Such exclusionary practices eroded trust between families and schools and had detrimental impacts on children's well-being and academic progress. Creating genuinely inclusive environments is essential for equitable access to education and the life chances of children and young people with SEND.

The recent White Paper emphasises the need to shift children and families from '*withdrawn to engaged*' and to ensure those who have been '*sidelined are included*'. We welcome the increased expectations on mainstream schools to demonstrate inclusion, for example, through the publication of a statutory inclusion strategy and the introduction of Inclusion Bases. However, further clarity is required on how the government will ensure that such Inclusion Bases will promote meaningful inclusion, and how inclusion for children and families from ethnic minority backgrounds will be achieved.

### Who is responsible?

- DfE
- LAs
- Education settings

What is needed?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear guidance and expectations from Government on how Inclusion Bases will promote meaningful inclusion, how they will be appropriately resourced to ensure high-quality support and targeted interventions, and how they will integrate with mainstream schooling.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National guidance to address and reduce the routine use of informal exclusions, unlawful reduced timetables, repeated 'send-home' practices and restrictive behaviour policies that disproportionately affect children with unmet SEND needs, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A requirement for schools and LAs to review and publish annual data on pupil development and outcomes (including early years), exclusions, suspensions, and reduced timetables, broken down by ethnicity and SEND status, to identify patterns of disproportionality and hold schools to account.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To enhance compassionate and effective support for children, investment is needed in targeted staff development across key areas such as:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ their duties under the Equality Act</li> <li>○ inclusive classroom practice</li> <li>○ behaviour as communication and how dysregulation presents differently in different children</li> <li>○ cultural and racial bias in SEND identification</li> <li>○ neurodiversity-affirming practice</li> <li>○ trauma-informed and culturally-informed behaviour support</li> <li>○ positive behaviour support to offer alternatives to punitive responses.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Such training should be undertaken alongside other essential training that underpins the delivery of inclusive support, including areas such as mental health literacy for children and young people.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of a statutory inclusion toolkit with practical examples, co-designed with families from a range of ethnic backgrounds, demonstrating what good inclusion looks like across all school phases.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure enrichment opportunities (school trips, extra-curricular activities) are accessible for SEND children from all backgrounds through adapted formats and other reasonable adjustments.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ofsted and LA SEND reviews should focus on inclusive culture, lived experience of SEND families, and evidence that schools are actively reducing the exclusion of racially minoritised SEND pupils.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robust review of the implementation of the Equality Act in education settings, with consequences for schools who fail in their Equality Act duties.</li> </ul>

## 6. Promote co-production and engagement with SEND families from diverse backgrounds

### Why is this important?

Parents are the experts on their child's needs, strengths and lived experiences, and therefore must be central to any decisions made within the education system. When families are actively involved, decisions are more accurate and better aligned with the child's long-term well-being. However, our research shows that many parents do not feel listened to by school staff and other professionals. Furthermore, the recent proposed changes to the EHCP consultation process in the White Paper have raised concerns about reducing parental voice at the most critical stages of support planning. Ensuring genuine, consistent parental involvement and recognising the expertise that parent carers bring is not only a matter of good practice, but it also helps shape more meaningful decision-making and safeguards against decisions that risk overlooking children's individual needs. Effective co-production with parents from diverse backgrounds also strengthens trust,

improves outcomes, and helps create a SEND system that families feel is responsive, collaborative, and equitable.

### Who is responsible?

- DfE
- LAs
- Education settings
- Charities and non-statutory organisations

What is needed?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand co-production with parents from ethnic minority backgrounds and involve families with lived experience in designing services, developing communication materials, and training professionals.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that parent carers are involved in shaping decisions and direction, rather than only seeking their feedback once systems and processes are already in place.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct regular feedback loops, revisiting reforms and practices with parents across different communities.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of a best practice guide for engagement and co-production with families, with a focus on parents from ethnic minority backgrounds, with examples from a range of LAs and organisations.</li> </ul>

## 7. Improve accountability within the SEND system, so the system is less adversarial for parents, and create clear processes for parents to hold schools and LAs to account

### Why is this important?

Under the Children and Families Act 2014, LAs have a legal duty to identify and assess the special educational needs of children and young people for whom they are responsible and to ensure that they receive support to help them in '*achieving the best possible educational and other outcomes*'. Despite this legal framework, parents commonly complained that LAs were failing to fulfil their statutory duties to provide the education and support their child was entitled to, and that they were experiencing lengthy delays and poor communication from LA SEND teams. Furthermore, parents were frustrated that LAs were generally not held to account for such failures.

While the proposed reforms will require schools and LAs to follow standards, there is limited detail on how non-compliance will be monitored and what consequences will apply. Strengthening accountability within the SEND system and ensuring that statutory duties are fulfilled will reduce the need for families to engage in adversarial processes to secure their child's support. It is important, however, to maintain individual routes for parents to complain about their child's provision. While parents of children with an EHCP can currently appeal decisions about their child's provision to the SEND Tribunal, this is a complex and often expensive route, and many parents do not feel confident about making a complaint. There are also concerns that the

proposed reforms might weaken Tribunal powers and reduce parents' access to the Tribunal, making it even harder to hold the system to account when things go wrong.

### Who is responsible?

- DfE
- LAs

<b>What is needed?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandatory requirement for LAs to publish SEND data, disaggregated where possible by ethnicity, socio-economic status and EAL, on:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ identification rates by need</li> <li>○ EHCP use, quality and timeliness</li> <li>○ reduced timetables, informal exclusions, managed moves</li> <li>○ parent complaint volumes, themes, and resolution times</li> <li>○ pupil outcomes (including data on Good Level of Development among 4–5-year-olds).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor and publish LA-level data on EHCP assessment timeliness, annual reviews, provision delivery and tribunal outcomes, disaggregated where possible by ethnicity.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure Ofsted reports include:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ evidence of racially minoritised families' lived experience</li> <li>○ whether schools' inclusion strategies are implemented</li> <li>○ the quality of support provision</li> <li>○ the effectiveness of early intervention and multi-agency coordination work</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce clear consequences for LA or school non-compliance (e.g. fines or improvement notices where EHCPs are not implemented; escalation routes for repeated failures; and targeted support and monitoring for LAs with inequitable outcomes).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in independent, culturally-competent, advocacy services that support families who are not satisfied with the support their child is receiving and seek to make a complaint.</li> </ul>

## 5. Conclusion

This research study has demonstrated the challenges that parent carers in London face in accessing education support for their children. Parents' accounts reveal a consistent picture of unmet SEND needs, poor communication and fragmented support provision, exacerbated where families face additional disadvantages. Many of the challenges faced by parents are shared across communities; however, these challenges were often compounded by language barriers, cultural stigma, discrimination and/or bias, limited trust in services, and fear of authority within ethnic minority families. 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.

The reality of the current SEND system is that persistent advocacy remains essential for many families, and they need immediate emotional and practical support to help them access education support for their children. Parent carers 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.

Implementing the recommendations outlined in this report requires coordinated action across government, LAs, schools, and the voluntary and community sector and a commitment to reducing inequalities across the SEND system. Crucially, meaningful improvement depends on building trust, ensuring cultural competence, reducing structural inequities, and empowering parents as partners in their children's education.

The '*Every Child Achieving and Thriving*' White Paper provides a strong national commitment to inclusion, disadvantage reduction, and rebuilding services around families. By applying these principles through a culturally informed lens, schools, LAs, and SEND professionals can take significant steps to ensure that all SEND children and their families, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds, are fully supported, engaged, and able to thrive.

## 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?

## Appendix 2: Research methodology

### 1. Year 1 (2023-2024)

In Year 1, a literature review was conducted which summarised existing research and published data relating to the experiences of education for families with children with SEND from ethnic minority backgrounds. It also identified gaps in knowledge and evidence in the research literature to date and helped to inform the next stages of this research project.

### 2. Year 2 (2024-2025)

Year 2 involved three strands of qualitative and quantitative research:

#### **Strand 1: Interviews with professionals from Contact (Spring 2024)**

Online interviews were conducted with three members of Contact staff responsible for supporting parents or campaigning on behalf of families.

#### **Strand 2: An online survey of parent carers in London (June-September 2024)**

Parent carers in London were invited to take part in an online survey about their child's educational experiences. Whilst the research is primarily focused on the experiences of parents from minority ethnic backgrounds, this survey sought the views of any parent in London with a child with SEND, regardless of their ethnicity. The survey aimed to provide a broad overview of the experiences of all families and to explore any differences in experiences by ethnic background. The survey included a mix of closed questions and open-ended questions that allowed parents/carers to write a response in their own words.

The survey was distributed through Contact's national and London office email newsletters, as well as via social media and other organisations and networks that support parents (e.g., parent carer forums). It was offered in three languages – English, Somali and Punjabi – to reach community groups that Contact has specifically worked with in London. However, all the responding parents completed the English language version of the survey.

A total of **412 parents/carers** responded to the survey and met the screening criteria - parents/carers living in London with a child aged 5-19 with special educational needs<sup>7</sup>. An additional five parent/carers completed the survey; however, their data were excluded from the complete survey analysis as they indicated that their child was outside of the 5-19 years age range.

Families from across the whole of London are represented in the survey responses, with at least one parent/carer response from each of the London boroughs. Responses were most common in the boroughs where Contact has offices - 19% of parents were from Ealing, 10% from Lewisham and 6% from Lambeth.

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<sup>7</sup> This also includes five parents of children aged 4 years old, who were included in the survey sample because their children attended Reception in primary school and were deemed to meet the screening criteria for the research.

Half (50%) of responding parents/carers described themselves as White, with White British the most common ethnicity (36%). A total of 43% of parents were from a non-White background<sup>8</sup>:

- 24% described themselves as Black or from a Mixed White and Black background
- 15% described themselves as Asian or from a Mixed White and Asian background.
- 4% were from an 'other' ethnic group.

### **Strand 3: In-depth interviews with 15 parents from minority ethnic backgrounds**

At the end of the parent survey, respondents were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a telephone or online interview with a researcher. The parent interviews aimed to explore families' experience of education in more depth, with a specific focus on parents from minority ethnic backgrounds.

A total of 95 parents from minority ethnic backgrounds provided their contact details in the survey, and a sample of 35 parents/carers were invited to participate. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were completed in November and December 2024.

Parents were asked about any access needs or support requirements they may have for the discussion (e.g., sign language, interpreter, or chaperone during the interview). However, none of the parents who participated in an interview requested access arrangements.

### **3. Year 3 (2025-26)**

Two strands of qualitative research were conducted in Year 3, between May and December 2025:

#### **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.

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<sup>8</sup> The remaining 7% of survey respondents did not provide details of their ethnicity.

Online interviews were conducted with **9 professionals** supporting parents, including Contact support staff and representatives from three London Parent Carer Forums<sup>9</sup> 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.

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<sup>9</sup> 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/>

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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](http://www.contact.org.uk)**