PARENT CARER PARTICIPATION 2025–2026



contact *For families with disabled children*

Delivery partner of

Department for Education

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Joint introduction from Contact and NNPCF

Parent Carer Forums (PCFs) in England play a vital role in influencing local and regional services and support.

Together with the National Network of Parent Carer Forums (NNPCF), PCFs work tirelessly to share parent carers' experiences in a solution focused way, ensuring that parent carers voices are heard at both a local and national level for the benefit of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

This report outlines parent carer forum activity delivered during the 2024-2025 financial year through the Parent Carer Participation Programme Funded by the Department for Education.

At Contact, we are committed to supporting local parent carer forums by strengthening the foundations PCFs need to work effectively and sustainably. Our role is to support them to have the structures, skills and support in place to carry out their vital role. We administer the Department for Education (DfE) grant for all PCFs in England. We provide training, information, and guidance to help PCFs run in line with the DfE grant requirements.

We are proud to work in partnership with the NNPCF supporting and developing an effective and sustainable network of PCFs.

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION ONGOING COMMITMENT TO PARENT CARER PARTICIPATION

We would like to thank the Department for Education for its ongoing commitment to parent carer participation. The continued investment in PCFs is a clear recognition of the vital role PCFs and the NNPCF play in improving services.

PCFs are essential at this time of SEND reform, they provide a direct and credible link between parent carers lived experiences and the systems and policies that are being reshaped. As changes are proposed on how support is delivered it is vital that reforms are grounded in the lived experiences of families with children and young people with SEND.

PCFs are uniquely placed to support change and improvements in a way that no one else can. They are an independent voice, separate from the services families are struggling with. They are strategic partners that work in solution focused ways to make improvements; they are local, and place-based and rooted in their communities. All PCFs are parent-carer led, shaped by experience, and they are able to reach families that might never be able to share their experiences with professionals. PCFs don't just describe problems, or share experiences, they work to find solutions and influence for a culture that works with families not to or for them.

NNPCF
National Network of Parent Carer Forums
"Our Strength is our Shared Experience"
www.nnpcf.org.uk

Department for Education

What the DfE grant programme enables forums to do



PCF membership has grown significantly, to

184,602

parent and carer members from 153,249, an increase of 20.46%



1,246

parent carers were directly involved in running the forum



163,782

parent carers shared their vital knowledge and experience via drop-in sessions, surveys, consultations and more, providing crucial insight to help PCFs influence local decision-making



1,719

parent carers represented families strategically in local meetings with service providers and partners

Forums online reach increased to

452,709

from 427,848, an increase of 24,861 (5.8%).

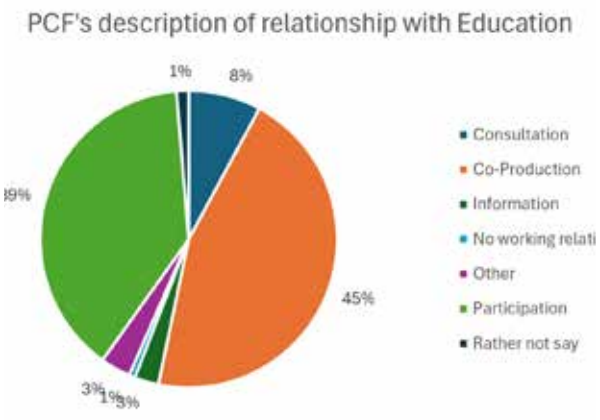


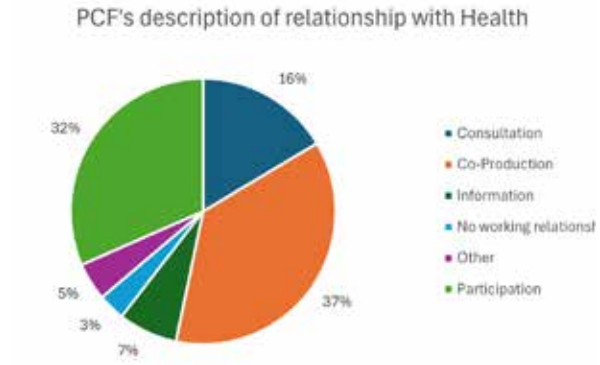
Forum statistics 2025 - 2026

PCFs play a vital role in supporting the improvement of services through parent carer participation and co-production. PCFs bring lived experience into decision-making by working in partnership with local authorities, health, education and other partners.

PCFs described their relationships with local partners in social care, education and health in 2024-2025 as: consultation, coproduction, information, participation, no working relationship or other.

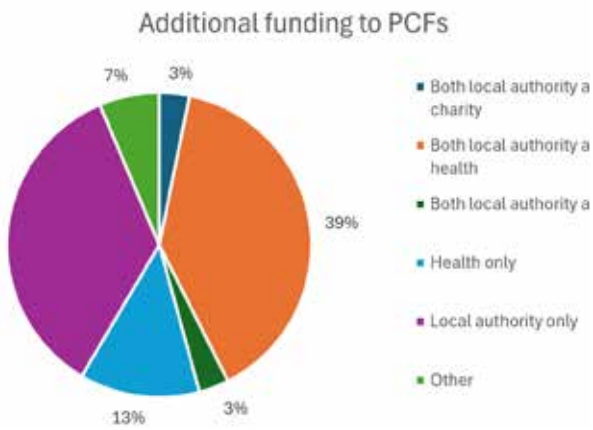
- **84% of forums were working in coproduction or participation with Education.**
- **49% of forums were working in participation and consultation with Social Care.**
- **69% of forums were working in coproduction and participation with Health.**

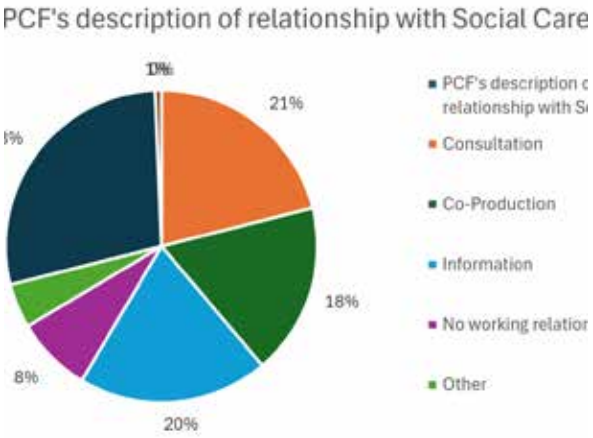




Some PCFs receive additional funding to support parent carer participation beyond the DfE grant.

During 2024-2025 59.5% of PCFs said they received additional funding from various funders.





Deprivation data

REACHING UNDER-REPRESENTED COMMUNITIES

Analysis shows that forums in the most deprived areas (quintile 1) have experienced the highest percentage growth in membership. This indicates strong reach and engagement in communities where demand for support is likely greatest, suggesting these forums are playing an important role as local support infrastructure.

However, this trend is not consistent across all deprivation levels. Forum membership growth drops notably in quintile 3, indicating that deprivation alone does not fully explain differences in membership change.

There could be several reasons for this. The growth in quintile 1 may be because these areas were previously under-served and are now catching up. In quintile 3, forums may be seeing slower growth or finding it harder to engage new members. The age and stage of each forum could also make a difference, as newer forums may grow more quickly than well-established ones. Other changes, such as forums merging or closing, may also affect the figures.

Further analysis will be undertaken to explore the impact of forum age, lifecycle stage, and levels of operational support, to better understand the drivers behind these variations.



National conference

BRINGING PARENT CARERS TOGETHER

The National Parent Carer Participation Conference took place on 3 February 2025 in Sheffield, planned and delivered in partnership with the NNPCF.

There were a total of 223 attendees, of which 177 were parent carers representing 97 separate PCFs. This annual event provides a unique opportunity for PCFs to meet with others outside their local area and region, build peer connections, share their experiences and hear updates.



WHEN ASKED WHAT THEY VALUED MOST ABOUT THE EVENT PCFS COMMENTED:

"Opportunity to share views and network"

"Networking with other PCFs and representatives of Contact."

"The ability to chat with other people who are as passionate as we are."

"Meeting others PCFs around the country."

"NNPCFs activities and networking."



Parent Carer Forums in action



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND UNDERSTANDING: SOUTHAMPTON PARENT CARER FORUM

Southampton Parent Carer Forum (SPCF) helped strengthen relationships between families and the school travel team by facilitating direct engagement and sharing parent carers lived experiences. The PCF helped staff better understand the day-to-day challenges families face, leading to more empathetic communication, improved handling of concerns and a more reflective approach to resolving issues before escalation. SPCF also worked collaboratively with the local authority and communications team to improve clarity, accessibility and timeliness of schools' travel information, ensuring it better meets families' needs. In addition, forum supported staff training and helped build mutual understanding of roles and processes, contributing to increased trust and a reduction in complaints.

GROWING REACH: DARLINGTON PARENT CARER FORUM

Darlington Parent Carer Forum significantly expanded its reach and engagement by introducing more inclusive and flexible way to connect with families, particularly those who are under-represented. Alongside regular drop-ins, the PCF developed initiatives such as gaming sessions for children out of education, adoption support groups and male-focussed events, partnerships with a local football club and informal family sessions. All the activities were designed to create welcoming spaces for sharing experiences and shaping SEND services. These approaches have increased participation and feedback, supported by tools like QR codes enabling the PCF to produced evidence-based reports that help influence local decision-making. As a result, parent carers' experiences have directly shaped service improvements. These include a restructured and recommissioned outreach model that better reflects families' needs, active involvement in creating a co-produced SEND strategy, participation in a newly announced therapies service review, and contribution to the development and mobilisation of a 'getting help' service. These changes were directly influenced by feedback gathered from parent carers and reflect a move towards more responsive family-informed support. The PCF received no additional funding beyond its DfE grant to deliver this work."

REAL CONVERSATIONS. SHARED IDEAS. BETTER SERVICES

The West Sussex Parent Carer Forum's Together for Change panel was established in autumn 2024 to bring parent carers and professionals together to listen, learn and work things out together.

At its heart is a simple belief: "Coproduction is not just a method – it's a mindset. It's about recognising that no one has all the answers, but that together, we can create something better!"

The panel is designed to put the theory of co-production into practice by giving parent carers and professionals the chance to meet as equals, share their experiences, ask questions, challenge ideas respectfully and find solutions together. Through open conversations and genuine partnership, the Together for Change panel is helping to influence how local services are designed and delivered.

The panel coordinator is part-funded through the forum's Department for Education parent participation grant, with the remaining funding provided through the forum's partnership agreement with the local authority and integrated care board.

To learn more about the Together for Change panel and the work of West Sussex Parent Carer Forum visit wspcf.org.uk.

BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER: SEND POWER IN HARINGEY

SEND Power, the parent carer forum in Haringey, alongside the SEND service, co-hosted two Voices Day events that brought together children, young people, parent carers, and professionals from across education, health and care to strengthen co-production and collaboration. A key outcome was the launch of the SEND Working Together Charter, developed with stakeholders to ensure families and practitioners are equal partners in shaping services across the borough. The charter promotes shared decision making, inclusive practice, and meaningful participation.

SEND Power continues to work in partnership with the school travel team through regular meetings and co-production opportunities to help shape future improvements.

This work was supported through the DfE grant funding, but they also received additional funding.

Parent Carer Forums in action

AWARD-WINNING ACTIVITY: PINPOINT CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Pinpoint Cambridgeshire and the children's occupational therapy team won an Excellence in Co-production Award at the National SEND Best Practice Event for improving support for children with SEND. Working with parent carers, they addressed sensory and emotional needs beyond the classroom, launched an OT Helpline to support families during long waits, and created a free primary school training pilot to help staff adapt sensory environments. Early feedback suggests staff are rethinking expectations and children benefit from being able to move and choose working positions to regulate and focus. This work was funded as part of Pinpoints core work, they receive additional funding from both the local authority and integrated care board.

'LET'S TALK SEND' PODCASTS FROM BEDFORD BOROUGH PARENT CARER FORUM

Bedford Borough Parent Carer Forum have created a 'Let's Talk SEND' podcast series. These were created in direct response to feedback from parent carers across Bedford Borough and are funded by Bedford Borough Council. The first episode introduces members of the PCF team and explains the role of the PCF. Other episodes cover subjects such as understanding SEND support pathways; education and community services; parent carer lived experience stories; transitions and preparing for adulthood; and working together with local services. Each episode features honest conversations with local professionals, services and parent carers sharing experiences advice and practice guidance to help parent carers navigate their SEND Journey.

ESTABLISHING EPIC LUTON PARENT CARER FORUM

Parent carers in Luton worked together with Contact to set up and develop their parent carer forum. The support helped reshape how the PCF operates – strengthening team structures, supporting recruitment, and improving relationships with local services. As a result, the forum now has a clear plan and is building capacity to meet growing demand across Luton.

"We want to say a huge thank you to [Contact Associate] for the time, energy, and insight she's brought to EPIC. We're also grateful that she'll continue working alongside us for a few more months while we build up the capacity we need to meet growing demand and support even more families across Luton. We couldn't have come this far without her."

PRAISE FOR CONTACT'S SUPPORT THIS YEAR

99% of PCFs rated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with Contact's support through their parent carer participation adviser and the grants team.

"[Adviser] has been amazing this year. She has helped us navigate the forum through a very difficult time and has also helped train our new reps"

"I have always found the support from Contact, whether the participation adviser or the finance team to be incredibly helpful and supportive, they have responded quickly to any enquiries we have raised and have supported us with possible next steps."

"[Adviser] has been exceptionally supportive during this year with all the challenges faced by the forum. She has been available via phone, email or Teams and has made us feel well supported."

"This year we asked a lot of Contact support and received a lot back."

"As last year, thank you for all the help, support and encouragement you have given our PCF."

"Our Contact adviser is absolutely brilliant. I cannot praise her enough. She is always there to support. I can email or text her and I always get a prompt response for a meeting and/or call to discuss my concern."

"Thank you to all the staff at Contact for supporting our forum."

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PARENT CARER PARTICIPATION ADVISER



Contact's parent carer participation advisers provided 5,950.65 hours of support for Parent Carer Forums during the financial year 2025-2026. Here one of our advisers tells us about her day.

Just like the Parent Carer Forums (PCFs) we support, no two days are ever the same — and that's exactly why this role is so important.

The day often begins with emails and messages from PCFs across our areas. Some share successes: creative engagement events, growing membership, or stronger relationships with local partners. Others reach out with challenges around capacity, sustainability, or navigating complex local systems.

ENSURING GRANT FUNDING IS WELL SPENT

A core part of the adviser's role is supporting the Department for Education Parent Carer Participation Grant — £17,500 per year that PCFs use to engage parent carers in their local areas and represent the collective parent carer voice at strategic level. This includes guiding PCFs through the grant approval process, supporting clear and proportionate planning, and monitoring delivery at the end of the year. Advisers work alongside PCFs to ensure grant funding is used effectively, transparently, and in ways that genuinely amplify parent carer voice, while recognising the realities and challenges of running an organisation on top of parent carer responsibilities and usually many other commitments.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Throughout the day, the adviser is often on calls with PCF leaders. Conversations range from governance and financial oversight to partnership working and managing challenging dynamics. Where situations are more complex, advisers coordinate additional support by liaising with Contact's experienced associates, ensuring PCFs receive targeted support.

The role also involves close collaboration with NNPCF colleagues across regions, aligning support. This collective approach strengthens regional participation and works towards learning from one area informing and benefiting others nationally.

The day often ends as it began: with connection. A follow-up email offering reassurance, a call to steady a PCF through uncertainty, or recognition of the remarkable creativity and commitment parent carers bring to participation work.

STANDING ALONGSIDE FORUMS

Parent carer participation advisers at Contact are here to do more than administer grants or provide guidance. It's about building trust, navigating complexity, and standing alongside parent carers and forums as they work to make services better for families. Their impact is felt not just in systems and outcomes, but in people feeling heard, supported, and believed.

"Without Contact's support we would not have been able to have made the positive changes needed to better support local families. Although there is still much to do with devolution and looking at future options the advice and support we received has put us in a strong position when considering future options."

Parent Carer Forum

We are Contact, the charity for families with disabled children.

We support families, bring families together and help families take action for others.

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