

WORKING TOGETHER!

TO IMPROVE
ENGAGEMENT
& PARTICIPATION

SEND
BIRMINGHAM



CONTENTS

Foreword	3
Context	4
Working Together to improve engagement and participation	6
How parent carers want to be engaged	7
'Good' parent carer engagement and participation looks and feels like....	12
Top tips when working in partnership together	16
Whole system approach to engagement and participation	18
Signposting to parent support groups and services	19
Glossary of terms	20
References	22

FOREWORD

Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families - Birmingham City Council
Director for Children and Families - Birmingham City Council
Chief Executive - Birmingham Children's Trust
Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Nursing Officer - NHS Birmingham and Solihull
Chair - Birmingham Parent Carer Forum
Director of SEND and Inclusion - Birmingham City Council

First and foremost, we would like to thank all the parent carers who helped to shape this **Working Together to improve Engagement and Participation** document. Your voices, lived experiences and opinions are echoed throughout and we are eager to continue to work together to create better outcomes for all our children and families.

As Birmingham continues to grow and evolve, so too does our commitment to ensuring that every child, regardless of their ability, has access to the support they need to thrive. This Working Together document is a testament to our belief that parents and carers are essential partners in shaping the life course of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

This document has been co-produced with the active involvement of parent carers, educators, health and social care professionals, reflecting a collective vision where every child's potential is nurtured. It acknowledges the unique challenges faced by families and aims to create a more inclusive, transparent, and responsive system of support.

We are committed to continuous collaboration, listening, and learning. This strategy is not the endpoint, but rather a living document that will evolve as we respond to the needs of our community. Together, we will build a more inclusive Birmingham, where every child is empowered to succeed.

We invite all parent carers, and stakeholders to join us in this journey, as we work together to create an environment that supports and celebrates the diversity of our young people.



CONTEXT

This **Working Together to improve Engagement and Participation** document has been fully co-produced with representatives from the Birmingham Parent Carer Forum (BPCF), Mainstream and Special Schools, Maintained Nursery Schools, Parent Support Groups, Voluntary Sector, Birmingham City Council (BCC) Birmingham Childrens Trust (BCT) and National Health Service (NHS) Integrated Care Board (ICB).

This document draws upon parent carers lived experiences, views, and aspirations around engagement and participation. The information in this document was captured through a range of face-to-face and online meetings, group discussions, events, one-to-one meetings, workshops, telephone conversations, social media groups, WhatsApp groups and email exchanges.

A multi-agency Parental Engagement Working Group was set up and identified the following strategic priorities.

- What parent carers would like from engagement and participation.
- Working in partnership to improve engagement and participation.
- How parent carers want to be engaged and participated with.
- What 'good' parent carer engagement and participation looks and feels like.
- Whole system approach to engagement and participation
- Top tips when working together.
- Signposting to parent support groups and services.

CONTEXT

What parent carers told us they would like from engagement and participation...

Openness, understanding and trusting relationships with practitioners

Support with removing barriers (e.g. cultural, financial, social and technology) that prevent effective engagement

To be kept informed, with honest, transparent, useful, and prompt communication

Rather than 'parental blame' we want to be believed, valued, and supported at our point of need

Consistency of support from one child to another

Reasonable adjustments which cater for both my children and my own additional needs

To be able to navigate the 'SEND System' with accessible information

WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The table below outlines how parent carers would like to work with practitioners across education, health and social care to overcome some of the barriers to engagement and participation.

Building Trust with Parent Carers:

Trust that parent carers are their child's first educators and their primary source of comfort and love. They have their child's best interests at heart and are true 'experts by experience.' Create a supportive culture where everyone works together without blame. Focus on collaboration and shared solutions rather than attributing fault.

Enhancing Communication and Listening:

Provide prompt responses to parent carers' emails or phone calls. Acknowledging their messages and providing clear follow-up times shows a commitment to keeping them informed.

Ask parent carers what forms of communication work best for them to ensure they feel heard and valued.

Improving Access to Information:

Provide clear and straightforward information to parent carers, ensuring they do not feel overwhelmed by unnecessary steps. Using simple language in all forms of communication and making materials accessible in the parent carers' spoken languages will help bridge any communication gaps. Ensure that resources like sign language and translated materials are readily available.

Strengthening Relationships:

Be open and honest, acknowledging any mistakes and apologising, when necessary, to build trust with parent carers. Seek to understand the challenges parent carers face and that exist within the 'SEND System.' Commit to working together to support the best outcomes for children. Agree to partner with parent carers, recognising their dedication and desire to achieve the best for their child.

HOW PARENT CARERS WANT TO BE ENGAGED

How parent carers want to be engaged and participated with.	Why this is important for parent carers	How do we do this?	How do we know if we have done this right?	What does good look and feel like?
<p>Parent carers want to be able to talk to professional's face to face</p> <p>Attend information sharing events. e.g 'meet the services'</p> <p>Shape SEND services by engaging with leaders and other public service practitioners</p> <p>Co-produce workshops and training opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent carers can put a name to the face • Build relationships and trust between parent carers and professionals • Be part of multi-agency working groups and involved in co-production projects and activities • Parent carers want to feel that the professionals have listened, heard and understood them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an 'open door' policy for parent carers to talk to professionals without the fear of blame or judgment • Ask parent carers what themes they want to discuss • Plan events together • Invite parent carers to various training and workshops e.g. SEND coproduction training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an increase in parent carers attending events • When there is evidence of professionals having listened, heard and acted upon information • Evidence of actions from meeting and events have been followed up • Parent carers are actively involved in the co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-evaluation of meetings, events and training workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good looks like When parent carers are fully involved with services that impacts on their child's learning and well-being • Good looks like When space and time has been created for parent carers to speak openly about their child's needs • Good looks like Parent carers feel listened to, valued and supported

HOW PARENT CARERS WANT TO BE ENGAGED

How parent carers want to be engaged and participated with.	Why this is important for parent carers	How do we do this?	How do we know if we have done this right?	What does good look and feel like?
<p>Have access to relevant support, information and communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent carers can learn more about their child's needs • It's important for the professionals to consider parents and carers own additional needs • Parent carers want to know how to navigate the 'SEND System' • Parent carers want their children to be able to make decisions about services they receive • Parent carers don't want to hide their disability from professionals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through annual reviews • Keeping appointments • Listening surgeries • Signposting • Co-designed, co-delivered and co-evaluated training sessions and workshops • Evaluation feedback and surveys • Meet the services events • If you say you are going to do something, then you should do it and if there is a delay, or you can no longer do it, then explain why as soon as possible • Services provide accessible tutorials about what they do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication is sent out with plenty of time via, text, WhatsApp, email, letters, newsletters and verbally • Increase in parental surveys returned with reports and actions attached • When there is evidence of professionals having listened, heard and acted upon information • Parent carers are clear about what each service provides • Evidence of co-produced meetings, workshops and events • There is clear information available in multiple languages and accessible formats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good looks like When professionals have made reasonable adjustments for the parent carer to be fully involved in the meeting or event • Good looks like Parent carers are telling SEND Services they are seeing and experiencing a difference when interacting with professionals

HOW PARENT CARERS WANT TO BE ENGAGED

How parent carers want to be engaged and participated with.	Why this is important for parent carers	How do we do this?	How do we know if we have done this right?	What does good look and feel like?
<p>Social activities, fun days, and cultural celebration events</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent carers want to celebrate their children in safe, warm and welcoming environments regardless of their additional needs • Parent carers and their families don't want to feel isolated, instead they want to feel part of their local community • Parent carers want to be able to freely celebrate their cultures and identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By holding various cultural events across the city • Professionals to be aware of the cultural diversity across the city and have the tools and resources to communicate effectively • 'Work with' parent carers and community members including faith leaders to understand cultural barriers and how to overcome them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear information available in multiple languages and accessible formats such as easy read guides and booklets and picture books • Community members and faith leaders are actively involved in meetings, events and strategic boards offering advice and supporting community cohesion • Specialist services and providers are present and accessible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good looks like Better community cohesion and acceptance of various cultures and faiths • Good looks like Better understanding and acceptance of a wide range of disabilities

HOW PARENT CARERS WANT TO BE ENGAGED

How parent carers want to be engaged and participated with.	Why this is important for parent carers	How do we do this?	How do we know if we have done this right?	What does good look and feel like?
<p>Attend online and in-person parent support groups, e.g. coffee and chat groups</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent carers gain peer-to-peer support • A non-judgemental and safe space to talk • Socialise and meet other parent carers • Sharing knowledge and experiences to empower each other • Promote the voices and engagement of under-represented communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign-posting parent carers to directory of support groups and services across the 10 localities • Promote Family Hubs across the city • Service providers (e.g. schools, health settings) create spaces for parent carers groups to meet • Professionals attend parent support and coffee morning groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When there are more parent support groups across the city for under-represented communities • There is an increased number of parent carers accessing existing support groups • There is an increase of parent support groups whose children are of different ages and abilities (0-25 years) • Evidence of feedback gained from both parent carers and professionals • Impact reports • Evidence of actions followed up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good looks like Greater representation and involvement of parent carers from across the city with children of varying ages, diagnosis and SEND needs • Good looks like Evidence of greater co-production working and its impact

HOW PARENT CARERS WANT TO BE ENGAGED

How parent carers want to be engaged and participated with.	Why this is important for parent carers	How do we do this?	How do we know if we have done this right?	What does good look and feel like?
<p>The use of social media, podcasts, visual and spoken media has been requested by parent carers rather than only written communications (SEND Strategy 2023-2028)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any parent carer can access information in a way that is suitable to their needs • English is not the first language for many communities in Birmingham • Parent carers want to feel like they are fully informed and involved. • Written documentation is often full of jargon and acronyms or language that is difficult to understand • Not all parent carers have access to technology (digital poverty) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplified language when using emails, telephone calls, texts and WhatsApp messaging • Documentation is jargon and acronym free • Easy read guides posters and leaflets • Accessible videos and audios, newsletters, pictures and symbols • Podcasts designed by and involving parent carers • Sign language, hearing loops, Makaton, talking books and braille etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involving parent carers in the co-design, co-delivery and co-evaluation of social media, documents, videos, podcasts and materials etc • SEND Services demonstrate they are maximising the use of a wide range of technologies and marketing materials and through action plans and impact reports • Provide access for parent carers to use laptops and / or Wi-Fi in community spaces such as Family Hubs, Schools and Leisure Centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good looks like When searching for SEND Services, it is evident that the materials, communication, websites and social media have been co-produced with parent carers and they are visible and accessible for everybody • Good looks like Parent carers have access to high quality and relevant information, using technology that is available through community sites across the city

'GOOD' PARENT CARER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE....

The quotes and case studies below demonstrate examples of 'good' parent carer engagement and participation where supportive, respectful, and inclusive environments were created for parents and carers to feel genuinely heard and valued.

Good parent carer engagement and participation is characterised by open, two-way communication, where their insights and concerns are taken seriously and contribute meaningfully to decisions affecting their children. This partnership approach fosters trust, empowers parents, and ensures that their knowledge of their child's needs is integrated into care planning. The process feels collaborative, transparent, and responsive, ultimately enhancing the well-being and development of the child.



'GOOD' PARENT CARER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE....

*My child is very happy at school!
She loves going to school every day.
She is keen to learn as much as she
can. She knows staff will always
put as much time in helping her with
anything she doesn't understand!*

Stockland Green School

*This has been a really positive
experience for my child. She has had
an opportunity to be with other autistic
people her own age for the first time
and was relieved not to have to mask.
She felt supported by all the adults.*

**Turtle Opera Project - Turtle
Key Arts in partnership with
Birmingham Hippodrome**

*It's a lifeline for our family!
Our child absolutely loves the activities.
The staff are amazing and truly care.
We can relax knowing our child is
in good hands.*

Birmingham Short Breaks

*The support from the team has been
incredible. They really listen to what
we need and work with us to find
the best solutions for our children*

Forward Thinking Birmingham

Good afternoon.

*I have just looked and can confirm that I
have now received the EHCP with the school
named. Thank you so much for your help
with everything. I'd like to thank everyone
that has been involved in X's secondary
transfer process. I am so happy for her to be
able to attend a school where she can feel
she belongs.*

Birmingham SENAR

*"Thank you very much
for the amazing session.
I have gained a lot of
knowledge and cleared
a lot of doubts. You have
made things easier to
understand now.*

I really appreciate it."

**Speech and
Language Therapy**

'GOOD' PARENT CARER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE....

Case Study 1:

Early Years Inclusion Support and the Sensory Support and Physical Difficulties Services Stay and Play Group

Background:

Birmingham City Council's Early Years Inclusion Support (EYIS) and the Sensory Support and Physical Difficulties Services (SSPD) jointly launched a Stay and Play Group. This initiative was developed in response to parent requests for a supportive environment to meet other families and the need for early intervention in children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This targeted group is for children aged 0–5 and their parent carers, providing a space for interaction, play, and learning under the guidance of SEND teachers and learning support staff.

Implementation:

The Stay and Play sessions run weekly, accommodating 2-6 children and their families. Parents are actively involved in co-designing the sessions through discussions with practitioners. This collaboration allows parents to influence the content, such as incorporating songs and rhymes that aid in speech, language, and communication development. The use of outdoor spaces also encourages freely chosen play, further supporting the children's social, physical, intellectual, creative, and emotional development.

Outcomes:

Despite many children being non-verbal, they can communicate their enjoyment through gestures, Makaton, and facial expressions etc. The programme has helped children develop key skills, contributing to their readiness for future learning. Parents have reported feeling listened to, empowered, and part of a genuine co-creation process. They appreciate the safe and supportive environment, opportunities to connect with other families, and the valuable ideas for activities to use at home.

Testimonials:

Parents have expressed their satisfaction with the programme, stating, ***"This is such a fun and safe space; my child really enjoys the sessions, and we use the activities at home as well."*** Another parent shared, ***"It's an opportunity to meet families with similar circumstances,"*** highlighting the group's impact on creating a sense of community and shared experience.

'GOOD' PARENT CARER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE....

Case Study 2:

Communication & Autism Team (CAT) Parent Engagement at Stechford Primary School

Background:

Stechford Primary School initiated a parent group which actively involves parent carers in the co-design of workshops aimed at supporting families with children who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This collaborative approach allows the school to respond to the specific needs and concerns of families, ensuring the workshops are relevant and impactful.

Implementation:

Termly themed workshops were designed based on feedback from parent carers. Topics covered include supporting sensory differences, developing healthy sleep routines, managing anxiety, and coping with change. The workshops, known as CAT PAC sessions, are tailored to different age groups and delivered in a hybrid model, combining face-to-face and online sessions. Session 6 of each CAT PAC series remains flexible, allowing parents to suggest themes based on their current needs. The school also introduced a CAT Transition Workshop for parents of Year 6 pupils transitioning to secondary school. These sessions are offered virtually at various times to accommodate different schedules, maximising access and participation.

Outcomes:

Parents expressed their appreciation for the initiative, highlighting the practical benefits and the sense of community it fosters. The ongoing feedback mechanism ensures that the content remains relevant, and the co-productive approach has strengthened the partnership between parents and the school. The inclusion of pupil voice in the transition materials further enhances the effectiveness of the support provided.

Testimonials:

Parents have praised the workshops, noting how much they have learnt about supporting their children and the comfort they find in connecting with others in similar situations. One parent mentioned, ***"I feel part of a community and enjoy talking to other parents and learning something new every time."*** Another parent shared, ***'Great sessions and a great initiative by the school because as parents of kids with special needs we are all in the same boat and learning for their betterment and help'.***

TOP TIPS WHEN WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP TOGETHER

Parent carers told us that practitioners should create an environment that encourages a safe space that is warm and welcoming.

When practitioners **plan meetings, undertake telephone calls or carry out a home visit for children etc**, their processes, language, and communication should be inclusive and jargon free. The table below details some participation and engagement **top tips** which were co-produced with parents and carers and young people.

Encouraging a safe space

- Self-awareness is key.
- Make sure no-one is left out of the conversation.
- Don't be afraid to ask difficult questions.
- Be open and honest as this is how we build trust.
- Don't be afraid to receive difficult feedback and try not to take it personally. Consider all feedback as constructive.
- Thank everyone for their time.

Warm and welcoming environment

- Make everybody feel welcome and say 'Hello, how are you?'
- Making sure the environment is suitable, accessible and takes reasonable adjustments into account.
- Be respectful.
- Make sure people understand and can hear you.

TOP TIPS WHEN WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP TOGETHER

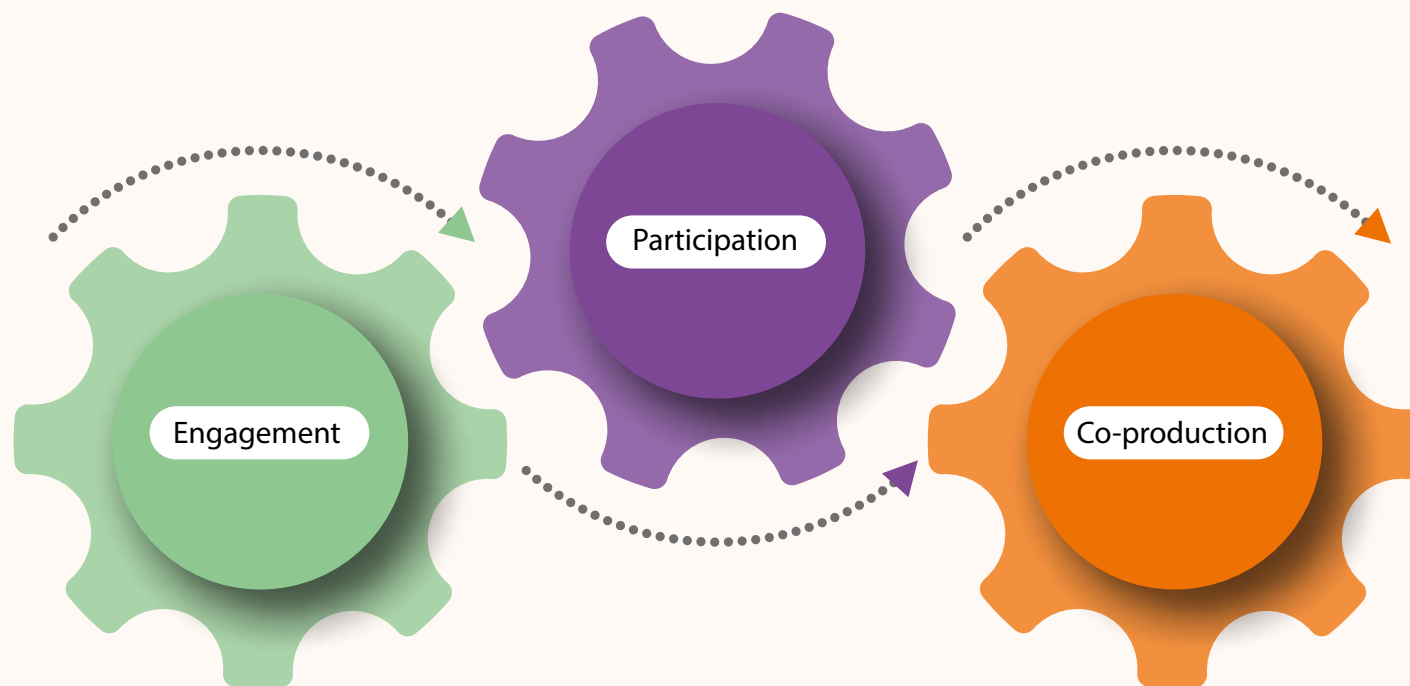
Language and communication

- Get the parents' names right. (perhaps use stickers with names written on).
- Allow the individual time to process the information, don't rush and give people time.
- Make sure you use words that everybody understands and keep the language simple.
- Be mindful that parent carers may have additional needs themselves and may require support.
- Explain acronyms.
- Don't make anyone feel like the odd one out.
- Be mindful of body language e.g. slouching and messing around with phones.
- Give eye contact so they know you're listening.

Planning and processes

- Be very clear of the purpose of the meeting and the expected outcomes.
- Review if the meeting/event has met its criteria.
- Ensure you have the right communication tools for that meeting/event (e.g. PECS, Makaton, interpreter, hearing loop, electronic devices etc.)
- Send paperwork out in advance of the meeting with guidelines if required.
- Make any paperwork simple so that anyone can read and understand. Think about the colour of the paper.

WHOLE SYSTEM APPROACH TO ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION



At its heart, a whole system approach to **engagement** and participation is about ensuring children, young people and parent carers are actively involved from the outset in co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-assessment alongside community, education, health and social care services.

When designing services that affect children and families, a whole system approach acknowledges that engagement and **participation** goes beyond individual activities and requires an understanding of how various parts of the system connect and influence each other throughout the decision-making process.

In essence, a whole system approach to engagement and participation means recognising that every part of a system matters, and everyone has a role to play in shaping the future. It's about creating a culture of **co-production**, where continuous learning and adaptation are valued, and where every voice can contribute to the shared vision.

Benefits of a whole system approach

Greater buy-in:

When people feel genuinely involved in decision-making, they are more likely to support the outcomes and work towards common goals.

Diverse perspectives:

Can lead to more creative solutions, innovations and making services more inclusive.

Enhanced resilience:

A system that engages all parts of its community or organisation is more adaptable and resilient to change.

Sustainable change:

By embedding engagement into the entire system, changes are more likely to be sustained over time.

SIGNPOSTING TO PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS AND SERVICES

Parent carers and professionals can gain access to various support groups and services across the city via the links below. Some of the links provide a map to where provision and support is located.

For more information about individual services and support groups, please contact the service providers directly, as they will be able to verify the accuracy of information:

Birmingham Local Offer directory of services

[Directory – Local Offer Birmingham](#)

This link takes you to all the community-based directories across the city

[Directories | Birmingham Voluntary Service Council \(bvsc.org\)](#)

Family Hub Family Voices

[Birmingham Family Hubs | Welcome to Family Hubs | Birmingham City Council](#)



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Accountability - refers to the obligation or responsibility of individuals, organisations, or systems to explain, justify, and take responsibility for their actions, decisions, and outcomes. It involves being answerable to stakeholders—whether they are citizens, employees, or others and ensuring that those responsible meet established standards, follow rules, and achieve expected results.

Children and Young People - All groups of children, young people, and young adults from birth to age 25.

Co-production – Co-production moving beyond involvement, participation and engagement with children, young people and parent carers towards something that is about people who use SEND services being treated equally. It is about them having a more powerful role in services they receive, so that their experience of the services is more meaningful and more in tune with what they need. The Birmingham SEND Local Area Partnership definition states

‘For us, co-production is about placing equal value on the contributions of children, young people, parents, carers, and professionals in making decisions and improving the services received and the experiences and outcomes of those living with SEND in Birmingham.’ ‘Co-production therefore requires involving people in an open and inclusive manner right from the very start of their experiences with public services, as a means of building and maintaining trust, so that they can contribute fully to the commissioning, design, delivery and evaluation of services and outcomes.’

Family - Incorporates parent carers and anyone seen as ‘family members’ who directly support and care for children, young people, and adults.

Governance - refers to the processes, structures, and mechanisms through which an organisation, institution, or society makes decisions, exercises authority, and ensures accountability. It encompasses the ways in which power is distributed and exercised, how decisions are made and implemented, and how stakeholders are held accountable for their actions.

Impact – The primary and secondary long-term effects produced by an action.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Local Offer - Provision available from the partners in Birmingham to support children and young people with additional needs. It is NOT the graduated response or a universal offer of support.

Local Offer website – Online platform where providers of services share their service descriptions and where families and professionals can search for local processes/ systems and contact details.

Parent carer engagement and participation - is when parents and service providers work together, recognising each other's expert knowledge, to design, develop and improve services for children and young people with SEND aged 0 – 25 in the local area. Parent carers can help to pinpoint problems families with children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) frequently experience. This knowledge is useful to service providers as they plan services to meet the needs of these families.

Plans - All types of written plans across Education, Health, and Care.

Provision - All types of help and support that meet need. Education, Health, and Care services, including education settings, Birmingham centralised education teams, school improvement activity, health services, social care team(s) and voluntary and community services.

SEND - Special Educational Needs and Disability.

Services - Any service across Education, Health, and Care, including statutory social care services (including adult social care), supporting children and young people.

REFERENCES

Birmingham Inclusion Strategy 2023 – 2028 [Birmingham Inclusion Strategy 2023 to 2028](#)

Birmingham SEND Strategy 2023 – 2028 [SEND strategy 2023 to 2028](#)

Birmingham SEND Co-production Framework and Charter [SEND-Co-production-Framework-Charter](#)

Birmingham Health and wellbeing strategy [Health and wellbeing strategy | Birmingham City Council](#)

Change for Children and Young People Plan 2023-2028 [Change for Children & Young People Plan 2023-2028](#)

SEND Code of Practice 2015 (0-25 years) [SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

