



Autism
Independence



Impact Report

Collation of work 2010–2025

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Section 1: 2010–2015: Where It Started

Reflection

From Personal Experience to Community Action 2010–2015

Following Zak’s diagnosis in the early 2000s, Nura committed to deepening her understanding of autism and child development. In the absence of culturally accessible information, she educated herself while supporting other families and identifying wider systemic gaps, including inequitable access to services, limited culturally competent practice, and the need to overcome stigma and taboo. What began as personal advocacy evolved into a vision for a structured, community-led response.

In September 2011, she began a degree in Early Childhood Studies at the University of the West of England, further deepening her academic and professional knowledge.

In 2012, Nura was accepted onto the Dartington School for Social Entrepreneurs programme, which she completed in 2013. Through mentorship, networks, and financial support, she formalised her vision and established Autism Independence CIC, rooted in lived experience, committed to overcoming

stigma, and providing culturally competent, accessible support.

In 2014, Nura further expanded her professional training. She completed the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities programme as a facilitator, delivered by the Race Equality Foundation. That same year, she became a licensed practitioner in the Early Bird Programme, designed for parents and caregivers of newly diagnosed autistic children and developed by the National Autistic Society.

Nura joined the Early Bird team in Bristol, recognising the importance of representation and culturally competent support for families from diverse backgrounds. This specialist training strengthened her ability to support families of newly diagnosed autistic children through evidence-based, culturally responsive practice.

In 2015, Autism Independence began developing partnerships to raise wider awareness of autism and engaged with ACTA Theatre and Bristol University to explore creative and community-based approaches, with a particular focus on understanding the experiences of Somali families with autistic children and the unique challenges they face.

In that same year, Nura reached out to University of Bristol laying the groundwork for a **pilot study** in Bristol exploring autism within the Somali community.

Zak remains central to the journey, shaping the organisation's focus on strengths-based support, empowerment, and access for autistic individuals and their families. His experiences have driven a commitment to overcoming stigma, creating safe spaces for open autism discussions. Through this work, Autism Independence has raised autism awareness within the Somali community at local, national, and international levels, helping to shift perceptions, challenge taboos, and promote culturally responsive understanding.

Over time, this work has expanded to support the wider global majority community, helping families with similar experiences, cultural barriers, and access challenges in autism support.



Early Impact

Autism Independence established its first community-based support groups at the SPAN Centre, working with Somali parents of autistic children and/or a learning disability. At a time when autism was largely unfamiliar within the community, and with no direct word for it in Somali, many families were navigating their child's diagnosis in isolation.

Key areas of impact included:

- **Building Safe Spaces:** Created trusted spaces where parents could openly discuss autism, reduce stigma, and increase understanding.
- **Engaging Families:** Delivered inclusive family sessions that strengthened relationships and encouraged shared learning between parents and children.
- **Raising Awareness:** Increased community understanding of autism, early intervention, and available support services.
- **Amplifying Voices:** Ensured underrepresented families were heard in local conversations about service provision and culturally responsive practice.

Through these initiatives, Autism Independence laid the foundations for culturally responsive autism and learning disability support services in its first five years, raising awareness and starting vital conversations within the community.

'This work bridged the gap between service users and service providers, reflecting a deep understanding of lived experience, community needs, and systemic gaps.'

This work bridged the gap between service users and service providers, reflecting a deep understanding of lived experience, community needs, and systemic gaps. Since 2015, Autism Independence has entered a new phase, advancing its work by raising awareness and understanding of autism through creative, evidence-based practices.



Section 2: 2015–2025 – Growth, Research, and Creative Practice

ACTA Theatre: From Insight to Impact – Using Creative Practice to Raise Awareness project 2015–2020

Using Creative Practice to Raise Awareness

In 2015, Autism Independence partnered with ACTA Theatre to develop a community-led project using performance to explore autism within the Somali community. This collaboration led to the creation of the play **Yusuf Can't Talk**, based on the lived experiences of Somali mothers raising autistic children with or without a learning disability.

Parents played a central role in developing the storyline and were initially cast in the production to ensure authenticity, cultural relevance, and ownership of the narrative. The project created a safe space for sharing experiences, accepting diagnoses, building trust, and reducing stigma. Sensitive issues were communicated in an accessible and therapeutic way, empowering families and raising awareness among professionals and the wider public.

The play had two main objectives: to expose the lived experiences of families living with autism, and to provide practitioners with insight into the cultural barriers affecting Somali families. Research demonstrates that drama can be an effective medium for communicating sensitive information, and **Yusuf Can't Talk** reached diverse audiences, including six performances in Bristol, one in the Netherlands, and additional performances across the UK. The project successfully expanded understanding of autism within the Somali community to audiences who might not otherwise engage with these experiences.





University of Bristol and ARC West: Driving Cultural Competence Through Research and Practice project 2015–2020

In 2015, Autism Independence contacted Dr Dheeraj Rai, whose **research** in Sweden found higher autism prevalence among Somali communities. Similar studies in Minnesota reinforced the need to understand the experiences of these families and their autistic children. This led to a **pilot study** in Bristol, co-produced with the University of Bristol and ARC West (formerly NIHR CLAHRC West), which produced three peer-reviewed publications and had a significant impact across multiple levels:

1. **“It was like walking without knowing where I was going”:** A qualitative study of autism in a UK Somali migrant community
2. **“Inside, Outside and In-Between”:** The Process and Impact of Co-Producing Knowledge About Autism in a UK Somali Community
3. **“Your children’s disability labels you”:** A community-based participatory study of stigma among Somali parents of children with autism living in the United Kingdom

The study demonstrated the value of community-led, co-produced research in shaping culturally informed understanding, addressing stigma, and informing practice.

Attracting National Recognition: The British Psychological Society 2017

In 2017, research led by Autism Independence in collaboration with the University of Bristol was featured by **The British Psychological Society**, bringing national attention to the experiences of British Somali families raising autistic children.

The findings informed policy discussions, including presentations to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism, and were further amplified through media coverage and community theatre performances.

As a result, awareness increased locally and nationally, strengthening the case for culturally informed autism services and more equitable support for marginalised communities, a core priority of Autism Independence’s work.

Pioneering Partnerships and Creative Dissemination Project 2017–2018

In 2017, catalysed by Autism Independence’s pilot study, ARC WEST partnered with Acta Theatre to combine academic expertise with lived experience and secured funding from the NIHR and the Wellcome Trust to support dissemination. This collaboration launched a new initiative that merged research with theatre, translating the pilot study and the Yusuf Can’t Talk play into a **creative presentation** delivered across the UK, including in Parliament.



The Overcoming Barriers: Autism in the Somali Community film project 2018–2020

Building on the 2018 pilot study, Autism Independence and ARC West, in collaboration with Therapeutic Media Company, developed innovative ways to share the research through accessible, culturally meaningful formats, producing the films *Overcoming Barriers* in both **English** and **Somali**. Inspired by the play *Yusuf Can't Talk* and supported by additional funding, the films explored the experiences of Somali families raising autistic children, addressing stigma, barriers to support, and cultural perceptions of autism, while strengthening professional understanding and practice.

‘Collectively, they have been viewed over 300,000 times...’

Extending the research beyond academia, the films embedded key insights into community awareness, training, and service development. Collectively, they have been viewed over 300,000 times and have raised awareness, challenged stigma, and promoted culturally competent practice locally, nationally, and internationally.



Creative Knowledge Mobilisation: 5 films project 2020–2021

To further extend learning, in 2020, Autism Independence, ARC West, and Therapeutic Media Company successfully launched a series of five evidence-based short films and fact sheets about autism for the Somali community, developed by National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)-funded researchers at the University of Bristol.

The new films and factsheets, available in both English and Somali versions, offer evidence-based advice and top tips, covering:

- **Why is my child different?**
- **What happens if I think my child has autism?**
- **How can I understand autism from a Somali perspective?**
- **What support can I get for my child and me?**
- **Is there a link between vaccinations and autism?**

The films are also available to Somali and other communities worldwide who share similar experiences in understanding and accepting autism.

Like other migrant groups, the Somali community has a high number of autistic children, many of whom are likely to be severely affected. However, there is no Somali word for autism, which makes it hard to understand and accept.

Inspired by the research, Nura completed her MSc at the University of Bristol (2016), delivered her **TEDx talk, “No More Us and Them” (2017)**, and began her PhD at the Norah Fry Research Centre (2020), exploring the experiences of autistic young

people from global majority backgrounds and their families during the transition to adulthood. These milestones strengthened Autism Independence's research credibility, public profile, and mission to bridge lived experience and systemic change.

Nura reflected: *“Although it was challenging and at times intimidating, disseminating the research findings enabled me to reach a wide audience and*

highlight the barriers faced by Somali families with autistic children. It allowed me to combine my lived and learned experience, including living with autism, social work, research, and MSc training, to drive social change. As an insider, I carried the voices of the many families I work with. When presenting to diverse practitioners, I delivered the findings with both emotion and evidence.”



Reflection

Voice, Visibility, and Impact

From 2015 to 2020, Autism Independence's combined research and community perspectives were **featured on BBC twice, Al Jazeera, BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour**, and in the UK Parliament, amplifying Somali and global majority voices, influencing public discourse, and contributing to national conversations on autism, equity, and cultural competence.

Autism Independence could not be prouder of the recognition by Prime Minister Theresa May in 2019

through the **Points of Light** award. In a personal letter to Nura Aabe, she said,

“Through ‘Autism Independence’ you have bravely drawn on your own experiences to help improve support for children with autism by breaking cultural, language and community barriers. You should be very proud to have created an organisation that not only eliminates stigma but also helps bridge the gap between parents and professionals. I wish you well as you continue your important work.”



Reflection

Local Partnerships and Family Support

Alongside national engagement, Autism Independence partnered with Bristol City Council SEND services to co-develop the Teenage Lives Workshops and deliver training for families on autism, communication, behaviour, and visual supports. Autism Independence also organised family trips and residential experiences, fostering social inclusion, peer connection, confidence-building, and shared positive memories.

Multi-Level Impact

Micro (Individual): Families gained confidence, understanding, and practical skills; Autism Independence staff strengthened leadership and dissemination capacity.

Meso (Organisational): Partnerships and co-produced outputs strengthened collaborations with academic, creative, and professional organisations.

Macro (Societal): Research and creative outputs influenced national and international awareness, informed policy, and contributed to systemic change in health, social care, and education.

Through research, creative practice, advocacy, and family support, Autism Independence demonstrated that lived-experience-led, co-produced knowledge can drive multi-layered social impact, raising awareness, strengthening cultural competence, and improving autism support systems.

Autism Independence is a grassroots organisation, built from the ground up and rooted in lived experience, cultural competence and trust. Our work is shaped by the voices of autistic people, parents and carers, who have too often been unheard or misunderstood. What began as community-led support has grown into a respected organisation that influences practice across education, health, and social care.



This lack of understanding creates significant barriers to navigating health, education and social care systems, leaving families feeling isolated and marginalised. The research also found that most families were not accessing social care or voluntary support, with fears of social services and mistrust of providers cited as reasons.

Healthwatch Bristol: The Impact of Autism in the Somali Community in Bristol Project 2016–2017

In 2017, Autism Independence and Healthwatch Bristol explored how Somali families in Bristol experience autism and access support services. The **findings** revealed that many families lack a clear understanding of autism, with around 58 % of those consulted not fully understanding the condition, and some interpreting it as an illness or purely a communication issue, due to cultural, language, and informational barriers.

‘This lack of understanding creates significant barriers to navigating health, education and social care systems...’

The report highlighted the need for culturally sensitive information, improved communication, tailored training for professionals, and community-focused education to reduce stigma and improve access to early intervention and support.



Consultation

Theory of Change Consultations 2017 & 2025



In 2017, Autism Independence developed its first Theory of Change, drawing on our expertise in co-production and research. This approach allowed us to design services in close collaboration with families, commissioners, practitioners, and service providers, ensuring that the support we offer is truly meaningful.

Building on this, our second Theory of Change for 2025 has ignited a renewed vision for the future of our services. These practices have continued to guide our organisation's growth, including the expansion of culturally competent support that meets the diverse needs of the families we serve.



Crisis Response Project: Supporting Autistic Families Through COVID-19 2020–2022

COVID-19 was one of the most challenging periods for families supported by Autism Independence. Many were pushed to the breaking point by the sudden disruption of routine, reduced physical activity, and minimal external support. One mother described the difficulty of explaining lockdown to her son, who could not process the abrupt withdrawal of school, outings, and in-home support without preparation or social stories. The loss of structure was highly distressing for autistic children reliant on predictability.

Sensory Support Intervention

In response, Autism Independence developed **sensory support bags** containing a gym ball, visual timers, and a calendar. These resources helped families maintain structure, communicate changes, and support emotional regulation. The gym ball enabled safe physical activity at home, thereby reducing anxiety. Families described the resources as life-saving in managing daily triggers and stress.

Digital Service Delivery and Outreach

Services were adapted by delivering online autism workshops via Microsoft Teams and Zoom to ensure continuity of support. Regular check-ins were maintained to monitor well-being and provide

emotional and practical guidance. Opportunities were created for families to connect, recognising the importance of peer support during isolation.

Community Belonging and Peer Support

As restrictions eased, talking sessions and food-based community events were organised to rebuild social connections. These safe spaces fostered a strong sense of belonging, with families supporting one another through shared experiences facilitated by Autism Independence.

‘These safe spaces fostered a strong sense of belonging...’

Disproportionate Impact on Global Majority Families

Families in the global majority were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Black communities experienced higher rates of COVID-19 infection, mortality, financial hardship, and reduced access to services due to structural inequalities (Public Health England, 2020; **Office for National Statistics, 2021**). These disparities intensified the challenges faced by Black families of autistic children during lockdown.



King's Honours: National Recognition for Autism Independence and Nura Aabe 2023

Nura Aabe, and Autism Independence were recognised in the 2023 New Year's Honours List, with Nura awarded a British Empire Medal (BEM) for outstanding services to people with autism. This honour reflects the significant impact of her leadership and the organisation's work supporting autistic individuals and their families.

'...the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with many describing the experience as transformative.'

Hot Yoga Project

Since 2019, with funding secured, we have offered hot yoga sessions for mothers of children with SEND, in response to families' self-identified need for this support. Many of the mums we work with face significant pressures and rarely take time for themselves. The sessions provided a space for them to relax, recharge, and prioritise their needs, and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with many describing the experience as transformative.



hot yoga sessions since 2020





Sirona Care & Health: A “Needs-Led” Approach to a Social and Communication Support Project 2021–2023

From 2021 to 2023, a **needs-led pilot** was conducted to provide early social and communication support to children aged 18–36 months with emerging autism profiles across Bristol, funded by NHS England and Healthier Together. Sirona Care & Health delivered the programme in partnership with Autism Independence.

The programme offered up to six tailored sessions per family, focusing on communication, interaction,

sensory skills, play, and sleep. Autism Independence provided cultural consultation, community engagement, and lived-experience insights to ensure accessibility for families from the global majority.

The project aimed to improve families’ understanding and confidence in supporting their child, strengthen culturally competent practice, and create more inclusive early-intervention pathways. Direct work with children and parents enhanced engagement and responsiveness to community needs.

Community Health – Health & Wellbeing: Birth to 16 Project: 2021–2023

“Autism Independence has given us hope.”

The **Birth to 16 Project**, funded by the Community Health – Health & Wellbeing Grant from the Quartet Community Foundation, was developed to support families from global majority communities raising autistic children aged 0–16.

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these families were left isolated and struggling to navigate complex education, health, and social care systems. Our role was to ensure that families understood their rights, felt confident to speak up, and could secure the support their children needed to thrive.

Over two years, a part-time parent coordinator and supervisor provided culturally competent, trusted support embedded within the community. Our work focused on:

- **Education advocacy**, including EHCP applications, reviews, appeals, and attending meetings with schools and local authorities
- **Practical support & signposting**, such as benefits advice, form-filling, and housing advocacy
- **Health and well-being**, supporting families to access diagnoses, therapies, and emotional support
- **Community connection**, through coffee mornings, workshops, and guest speakers from SEND, housing, and other advice services

Support and group activities were delivered in an accessible manner, with Somali translation where needed, ensuring families felt included and understood.

 **120**
families supported overall

 **67%**

of families received intensive, one-to-one advocacy support

For children and young people, this translated into:

- Improved access to appropriate education placements
- Increased school-based support
- Better emotional well-being and stability

Our advocacy led to successful EHCP appeals, improved communication between families and schools, and better outcomes where support had previously been inconsistent.

 **74%**

rated the service as very good
21% rated it as good

Parents consistently highlighted EHCP support as having the biggest impact, alongside feeling less alone and more hopeful about their child's future.

“I found my voice to be able to fight for my son.”





Case study

■ **“Autism Independence has given me confidence to speak up.”**

M is 10 years old, from Afghanistan, and has a diagnosis of autism. His older brother, A, 18, assists in caring for him and the rest of the family.

Before meeting Autism Independence, the family experienced instability and isolation. Frequent moves and discrimination from neighbours made daily life difficult. M struggled with social interactions and communication, often becoming frustrated and hurting himself or others. For six months, he stayed at home, missing school, and the family faced significant challenges managing his needs. Language barriers hindered access to support and communication with professionals.

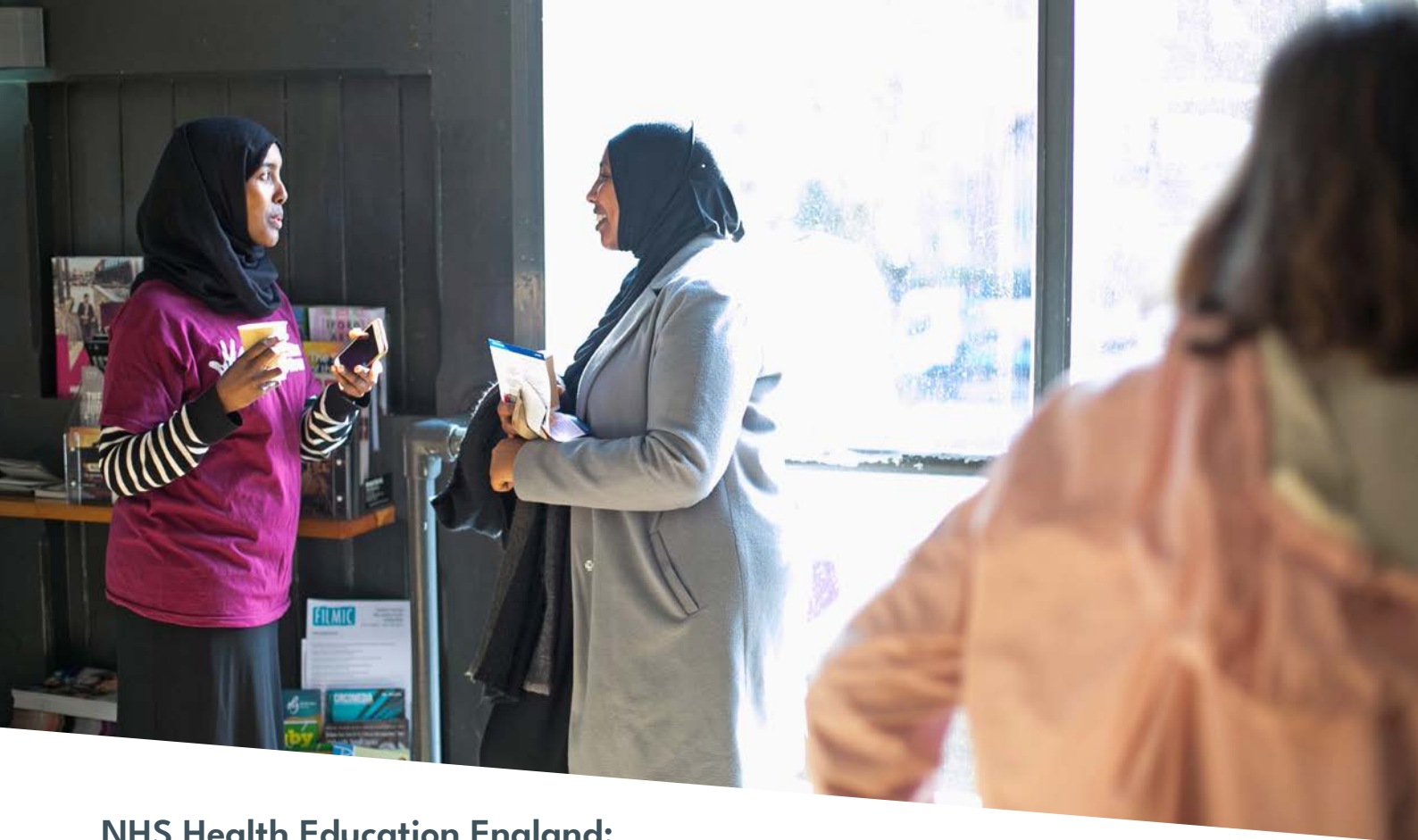
Autism Independence became involved following a neighbour’s referral to the family. The team helped the family access benefits, including Disability Living Allowance, and mediated with M’s school to ensure the family’s voice was heard. They discovered that M’s Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) had been completed without family input, and no translator had been offered. They facilitated communication, advised the family to provide evidence of M’s needs, and helped the school determine the best way to support him.

The team also secured school transport, thereby relieving the family’s logistical burden, and supported them through a safeguarding incident, attending meetings with police, social services, and health professionals to ensure M’s safety and support.

■ **‘This gave him the confidence to express the family’s needs effectively...’**

A, who had previously lacked confidence speaking to professionals, received coaching and preparation from the team. This gave him the confidence to express the family’s needs effectively and ensured meetings with social workers, school staff, and other professionals were productive and respectful.

With Autism Independence’s guidance, the family feel more settled, supported, and confident in managing M’s needs.



NHS Health Education England: Autism Peer Support Education Pilot Project 2022

Funded by **NHS Health Education England**, Autism Independence delivered a pilot to provide culturally competent autism peer support and education for families from global majority communities. The project leveraged our lived experience and research expertise to address barriers to accessing autism services.

We engaged parents and carers through surveys, interviews, focus groups, and bilingual workshops (Somali and English) to explore experiences across the pre-diagnosis, diagnosis, and post-diagnosis stages.

Key Findings:

- Families faced long waits, fragmented services, repeated storytelling, and minimal post-diagnostic support.
- Education settings often cause stress due to inconsistent implementation, low autism awareness, and rigid policies.
- Parents, especially single mothers, reported anxiety, burnout, and social isolation.
- Language, cultural barriers, and lack of trust limited access to services.

Impact & Recommendations:

- Peer support can reduce isolation, increase confidence, and improve navigation of services.
- Consistent, named peer support roles and culturally accessible resources are essential.
- Integrated approaches across health, social care, and education are needed to provide timely, coordinated support.
- Co-produced models ensure interventions reflect the lived experience of global majority families.

Legacy:

Our work has influenced policy, produced widely used bilingual films and educational resources, and strengthened culturally responsive support pathways, improving health, wellbeing, and equality for autistic children and their families.

‘The project leveraged our lived experience and research expertise to address barriers to accessing autism services.’



BNSSG ICB: Lived experience of people with learning disabilities and/or autism from minority ethnic groups, using health services 2022–2023

In 2023, Autism Independence and Bristol, North Somerset & South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board (BNSSG ICB) explored the experiences of adults with learning disabilities and/or autism from global majority communities in accessing health and support services.

‘Participants reported gaps in communication, lengthy processes, and unmet needs that affected their daily lives and well-being.’

Surveys and discussions revealed barriers in diagnosis, healthcare, education, and transitions to adult support, often worsened by cultural, language, and systemic challenges. Participants reported gaps in communication, lengthy processes, and unmet needs that affected their daily lives and well-being. **The report** highlights the need for culturally competent, accessible services and offers recommendations to improve inclusive health and social care practice.

BNSSG ICB: Dad’s Project 2023–2024

In 2024, we explored the experiences of fathers of children with SEND to understand their specific challenges and unmet needs. Five in-person workshops and a wider survey revealed that many dads need safe spaces to meet, often feel less confident navigating autism-related processes, and face language barriers, though some were highly engaged. Findings will inform policymakers, social care, and educational services to ensure more inclusive and supportive provision for fathers and their families.



‘...workshops and engagement activities reduced isolation, empowered families, and increased confidence in accessing services.’





BIF 1: Accessing Autism Services in Bristol – The BAME Perspective Project 2020–2021

Funded by the **Bristol Impact Fund**, this project sought to understand and address the challenges families from the global majority face in accessing autism services in Bristol. Autism Independence mapped existing autism services, identified gaps in provision across the autism lifecycle (pre-diagnosis, diagnosis, post-diagnosis), and developed surveys and workshops to engage families and gather insights.

Service mapping and survey: identified providers and collected 34 survey responses from the global majority families. Findings included late awareness of services, a gender imbalance (predominantly female engagement), financial strain, and adverse mental health impacts.

‘...early intervention and communication in schools, nurseries, and community hubs are critical.’

Workshops: Two 1.5-hour online workshops were held in June 2021, with 36 participants (33 Somali women). They were delivered in Somali and English and explored survey results and barriers to access, including language, childcare, and trust.

Cultural awareness and partnership: worked with Bristol City Council’s autism team to develop culturally appropriate workshops, improving Somali families’ understanding of autism and confidence in navigating support services.

Reducing disadvantage and inequality: created a comprehensive map of autism services in Bristol, identifying gaps and informing future improvements. Families gained awareness of available support.

Improving health and wellbeing: workshops and engagement activities reduced isolation, empowered families, and increased confidence in accessing services. Families reported reduced stress through knowledge and peer support.

Increasing resilience: Families developed skills to navigate services independently and advocate for their children, thereby enhancing long-term resilience throughout the autism journey.

The study found that awareness of services is often delayed; early intervention and communication in schools, nurseries, and community hubs are critical.

Male engagement is low; targeted initiatives should encourage male participation in autism-related support services.

Education and employment pathways warrant attention, given disproportionate exclusions and limited opportunities. Community-based alternative education and autism-specific employment support should be explored.

Intersectionality (race, gender, religion, language) must be considered in all service provision.

The project demonstrates that culturally tailored, community-led approaches significantly reduce barriers for families in the global majority, improving access to services, well-being, and resilience. Through mapping, surveys, workshops, and partnerships, Autism Independence has empowered families, fostered community connections, and highlighted critical areas for further development. These insights inform future service planning and interventions to support equitable access to autism services in Bristol.

BIF 2: Transition to Adulthood Project 2021–2026

The Transition to Adulthood Project is funded by **Bristol Impact Fund 2 (BIF2)**. It was developed to support autistic young people and young people with a learning disability aged 16–25 from the global majority communities. At the heart of the programme is a holistic relational approach: building trust, taking time to really know each young person, and creating safe, non-judgemental spaces where they can talk openly about who they are, what they want and what matters to them, including their fears and insecurities, so we can fully support them at their core.

Many of the young people supported had not previously experienced this level of personalised, culturally informed support. By meeting young people where they are, the team has enabled them to build confidence, articulate their aspirations, and pursue education, work experience, and employment that genuinely reflect their interests and strengths. By listening to them, we can identify small details to explore together. This has enabled the team to clarify its core identity and develop a plan for its future implementation.

Year 1 (2021–22): Building Trust and Foundations

The first year focused on establishing the programme and building relationships with young people and families who were often cautious about services due to past experiences. While initial targets anticipated supporting more young people, the team quickly recognised the complexity and intensity of each family's needs. We also engaged with services and other organisations to build relationships and gain a better understanding of how they operate, enabling us to identify those that would best meet the needs of the families we support.

As a result, delivery targets were intentionally adjusted to allow for more intensive support. 39 young people were supported, many requiring sustained, holistic input across education, wellbeing, family circumstances and navigating the system.

Time was spent listening, building trust, and helping young people feel safe being themselves. For many, this was the first opportunity to discuss adulthood, work, or education openly without feeling judged or pressured. This was important because the young people had concerns, and we were able to discuss and work through them together. The team supported young people in exploring their interests and imagining possible futures, while helping families understand post-16 pathways and SEND systems.

Year 2 (2022–23): Growing Confidence and Possibility

In Year 2, engagement expanded significantly, reaching 150 participants through workshops, inclusive and diverse careers fairs, and direct support.

The team supported young people in building confidence, developing practical skills such as CV writing and interview preparation, and understanding reasonable adjustments. Young people began taking early steps into work experience, further education, and peer groups, often for the first time.

Families reported increased confidence and a shift from fear and low expectations to hope and informed decision-making. Throughout this, we always kept the young person's values and interests at the heart of everything.

Year 3 (2023–24): From Aspiration to Action

By Year 3, the project had reached more than 600 participants through direct support for young people and their families, collaboration with professionals, and speaking at events across the city.

Our work reflected strong community trust. Young people were no longer just talking about aspirations; they were also acting on them. With support, many progressed into work experience placements, employment pathways, and further education.

The team continued to provide a safe space where young people could check in, reflect and adjust plans without pressure. This gave them the space they needed, whilst knowing we were there for them. This helped reduce feelings of overwhelm, gave them time to process information, and ensured progress remained aligned with their genuine goals.

Year 4 (2024–25): Thriving, Leadership and System Influence

By mid-Year 4, the project had exceeded its target number of families supported and introduced a waiting list.

Young people supported at this stage are thriving, engaging in work placements, applying for employment, and pursuing educational pathways aligned with their interests, strengths, and ambitions. The team's relational approach remains central, particularly for young people navigating anxiety, cultural expectations, or complex life circumstances.

Alongside direct delivery, the programme expanded its system-level impact through culturally competent training for professionals and autism-awareness workshops in faith and community settings. The project is now recognised as a trusted transition service, with professionals actively referring families and seeking collaboration.

“I am now very optimistic. Deniece helped me a lot and put optimism in me; she made me feel more and more positive. Deniece listens to me, gives good support and understands me.”

Overall Impact

Over four years, the Transition to Adulthood Project has shown that when young people are met with trust, understanding, and genuine care for who they are, they can thrive.

This demonstrates the value of relational, community-led transition support in improving outcomes, reducing pressure on statutory services and enabling young people to build fulfilling, independent futures.

“At first I had nothing better to do than average teenage stuff and now honestly, I feel great and I am in a better place.”



CONNECTING
COMMUNITIES
TOGETHER

EVERYONE



Case study



Progression to Independence

D is 16 years old, has a diagnosis of autism, and attends a mainstream secondary school in Bristol with support through an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). His younger sister also has autism and attends a specialist school. Following the bereavement of D’s grandmother, who had been the family’s main support, D’s single mum was struggling with her mental health and managing a large family.

Autism Independence stepped in to provide holistic support. The team visited the family home, helped organise paperwork, reviewed D’s EHCP, and liaised with school and other professionals to ensure the family’s concerns were understood and addressed. Consent was secured to act in D’s best interests throughout.

The team explored D’s aspirations and interests, discussing pathways to college, higher education, and apprenticeships. D chose the Progression into Independence course at City of Bristol College. Autism Independence supported the family in visiting the college, asking questions about breaks and lunchtimes, and completing enrolment forms. The team accompanied D on his first day to help him feel confident and safe.

D is now in his second year at college, thriving academically and socially. He has become well respected by peers and staff alike. He has recently taken on the role of ambassador, providing guidance and reassurance to prospective students, sharing his experiences, and helping new students feel welcomed.



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Culturally Competent Training Sessions for Professionals



10

Together in Faith & Inclusion Workshops

Quote from a Cultural Competence Training Workshop:

“I am blown away of the incredible work undertaken by Autism Independence. They are one of the most authentic and genuinely empathic organisations I have come across since living in Bristol. This course was extremely enlightening; I learnt a lot and will take this back to my organisation and share. I would really value any opportunity to know if Autism Independence could offer training for other organisations, everyone working with young people and families should do this course.”



Annual Health Check Pilot Project: Responding to the Learning Disability Mortality Review Board (LeDeR) Findings 2024

In December 2023, we received funding from **Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Integrated Care Board (BNSSG ICB)** to carry out a four-month pilot project. The aim of this project was to raise awareness of **annual health checks** for people with a learning disability from the global majority communities.

‘...the average age of death for people with a learning disability who are from an ethnic minority is 34 years...’

We were awarded this funding following the publication of two reports. The first was **our research** in 2021. This looked at people’s experience of accessing health appointments who were autistic or had a learning disability from the global majority communities. Inequalities experienced by the cohort of people we spoke to are compounded by language barriers, low awareness of entitlements such as annual health checks, cultural stigma, digital exclusion and limited or no access to reasonable adjustments.

In 2023 **The Race Equality Foundation** published the **We Deserve Better Report**. This highlighted that the average age of death for people with a learning disability who are from an ethnic minority is 34 years, just over half the life expectancy of their white counterparts, at 62 years of age.

The findings from our pilot project were Included In the **LeDeR Report 2023–24**.

Health Navigator Project 2024–2026

Following on from this pilot project, we are now delivering a two-year programme (2024–2026) to continue this work, funded by BNSSG ICB. It is delivered by three multilingual health navigators, with support from a project coordinator. The team provides support to individuals and families facing multiple barriers to accessing preventive healthcare.

We provide culturally competent support, which includes language support in Somali, Polish, Punjabi and Urdu, helping people:

- Join the learning disability register
- Access annual health checks
- Attend appointments
- Understand and follow through on health action plans
- Understand and ask for reasonable adjustments

 **60+**
families supported

 **40+**
community events attended

 **20+**
workshops delivered

Case study

“Since coming to Autism Independence, I feel heard and understood, and that I’m finally getting support in place for my children.”

M, a lifelong Bristol resident, is a mother of seven children, five of whom have additional needs—three are autistic and have a learning disability, and one is undergoing assessment. M herself has a learning disability, which has made navigating support services challenging.

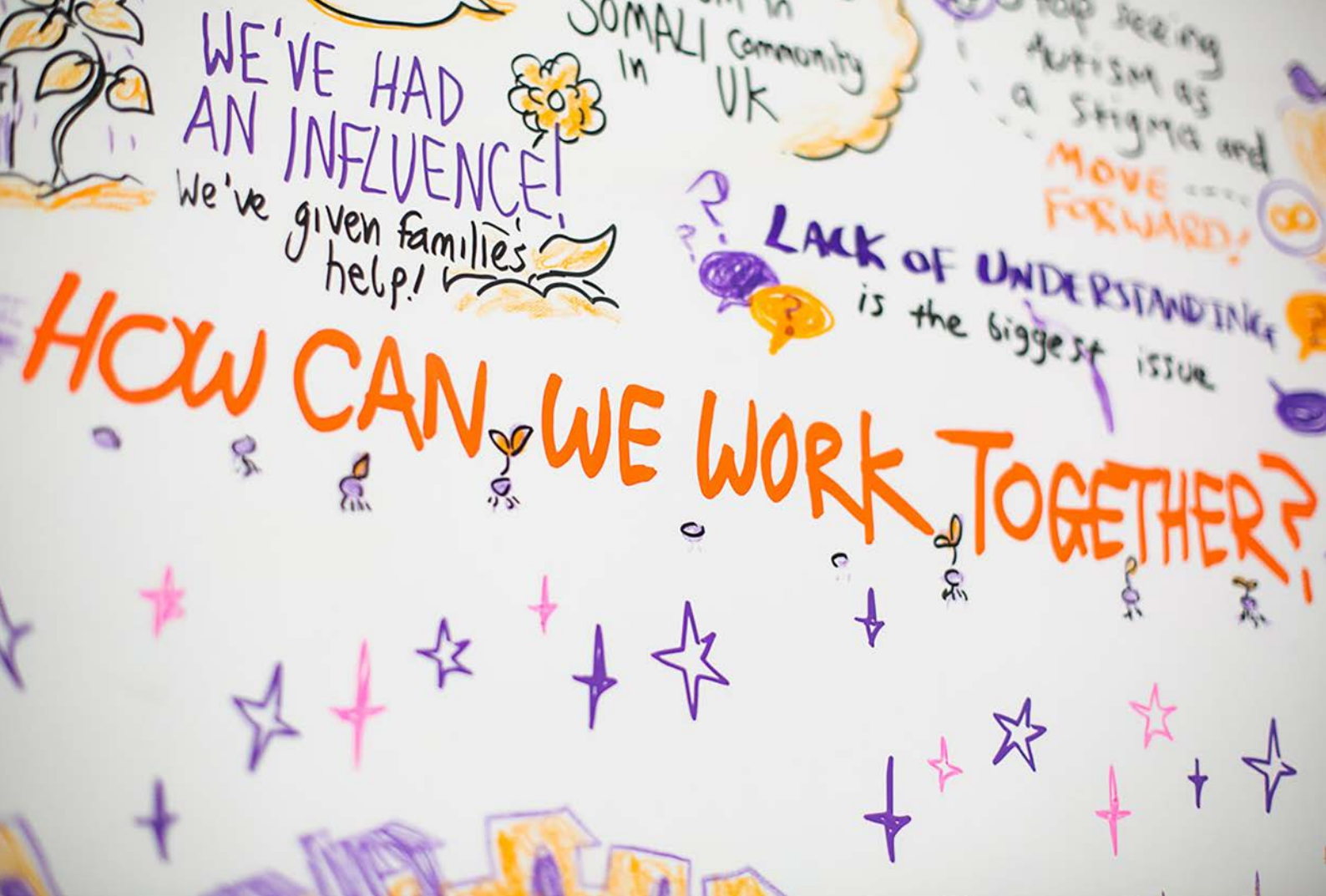
Before Autism Independence, M struggled to access the right support for her children. Her eldest, A (21), required advocacy to be registered for the learning disability register and to access annual health checks. H (13) has been out of school for two years, awaiting an autism assessment, while R (12) had unaddressed hearing issues affecting his attendance. U (7) is non-verbal, has sensory and motor delays, and recently received an autism diagnosis after Autism Independence intervened. M’s youngest daughter (5), is beginning the EHCP process

The family faces complex challenges: coordinating appointments, managing emotional

regulation, supporting multiple children with additional needs, and navigating inconsistent social and health services. Past interactions with social services were sporadic, leaving M feeling unsupported and unheard.

Autism Independence provided holistic support, attending appointments, advocating for assessments, and guiding M through EHCPs, learning disability registration, and health services. Over time, M has gained confidence and agency, now leading conversations with professionals and independently managing her daughter’s EHCP. She has also started volunteering with Autism Independence, supporting other families and helping to organise events.

Autism Independence continues to support M and her family by helping them navigate complex needs, access appropriate services, and build resilience and confidence.



Education & Health Care Plan Navigator – Under 16 Advocacy Project 2025–2026

Our under-16 advocacy project, funded by the John James Foundation, Bristol, and the Quartet Community Foundation, supports families of children with SEND under 16 with the EHCP process. We have observed significant growth in demand for our services over the years, and this funding has enabled us to hire an additional parent coordinator to meet this increase.

The parent coordinator is providing:

- Advocacy support for families to obtain EHCPs
- Language support in Somali
- Corresponding with schools and the local authority
- Workshops and coffee mornings

‘We have observed significant growth in demand for our services over the years, and this funding has enabled us to hire an additional parent coordinator to meet this increase.’



Section 3: Future projects

We have recently been successful with funding from:

- Bristol Impact Fund 3 (BIF3) to fund our Roadmap to Independence Project 16–25 year olds, 2026–2030.
- Henry Smith Foundation – funding to provide advocacy support to young people aged 14–25 years old to support them in speaking up and securing their rights who are from global majority communities with an autism diagnosis and a learning disability, 2026–2030.
- NHS England funding to deliver two training sessions on cultural competence to staff in health, education and social care across Southwest England, 2025–2026.
- UWE project: developing four workshops for mixed stakeholders across Bristol to increase cultural awareness of autism and cultural competence for professionals, 2025–2026.

Our Team

- **Deniece Dixon** – Project Manager:
Transition to Adulthood Team
- **Hibaq Yusuf** – Assistant to Project
Manager: Transition to Adulthood Team
- **Hodan Khahin** – Parent Coordinator:
Under 16 Project
- **Ifrah Omar** – NHS Health Navigator:
NHS Health Navigator Project
- **Madiha Irshad** – NHS Health Navigator:
NHS Health Navigator Project
- **Michalina Cort** – NHS Health Navigator:
NHS Health Navigator Project
- **Nura Aabe** – CEO
- **Vanessa Scott** – Project Manager:
NHS Health Navigator Project

Directors

- **Aga Kowalska-Mulholland**
- **Deniece Dixon**
- **Nura Aabe**
- **Vanessa Scott**

Our funders

We are enormously grateful to our funders who make it possible for us to continue our work to support children, young people and families across Bristol:



Autism Independence

First Floor,
7 Eastgate Office Centre,
Eastgate Road,
Bristol BS5 6XX

T 0117 427 0562

M 07354 486 322

hello@autism-independence.org

autism-independence.org



**Autism
Independence**