



Understanding Ethnic Minority Experiences of Using Legal Services

M·E·L Research

March 2022

Background to the research

The Legal Services Consumer Panel (LSCP) has identified a need, based on analysis of its ongoing quantitative tracking research, to understand the experiences of legal services consumers of ethnic minority backgrounds.

The LSCP undertook a consumer segmentation exercise using the 2021 tracking data. The '*Confident Consumers*' segment analysis suggested those who were confident in the choice of providers they had and that their provider would deliver a good service, were almost half as likely to be from an ethnic minority background (12% vs. 21% in the overall data).

The LSCP has also published specific reports and infographics highlighting the experience of ethnic minority consumers. In short, despite shopping around more than White British consumers, they are **less likely to have a good experience** of the service and the outcome of their legal matter and **less likely to trust** providers.



LEGAL
SERVICES
**CONSUMER
PANEL**

Research Aims

1

To understand the **experience** of ethnic minority legal consumers through a deep-dive qualitative approach.

2

To elicit **detailed stories and experiences** to provide insight into what actions can be taken to enable stakeholders to do more to improve the experience of these consumer groups.

Methodology



M·E·L Research was commissioned by the **Legal Services Consumer Panel** to conduct qualitative research using an online digital platform.



To qualify to take part in the study, participants must have used a legal service in the last two years for the purpose of a family or employment law matter.



In total 13 people participated in the online activities. Participants were set questions over the course of a week in March 2022 to respond to privately and confidentially, exploring their personal experiences of using legal services.

Sample composition

	Gender	Ethnicity	Legal matter
1	Male	White and Black African	Family Matter
2	Male	White and Black African	Family Matter
3	Female	Other mixed heritage background	Both
4	Female	Chinese	Employment Dispute
5	Male	Caribbean	Family Matter
6	Female	Pakistani	Family Matter
7	Male	Indian	Family Matter
8	Female	Caribbean	Employment Dispute
9	Female	African	Employment Dispute
10	Male	African	Family Matter
11	Female	Pakistani	Employment Dispute
12	Female	Pakistani	Family Matter
13	Female	Indian	Family Matter

- Given the need to discuss experiences in-depth, it was felt participants should have had a relatively strong investment in the legal interaction to be studied. As a result, it was agreed that the legal problems would focus on Family and Employment law.
- All names and any personal identifiable features have been removed from the report in order to protect the anonymity of participants and to fully comply with GDPR.

Executive Summary

- In many ways ethnic minority consumers share similar perspectives of legal services to that of White British consumers.
 - It is a profession which was felt to be **highly professional, highly skilled** and consequently **high costs were associated** with services.
- While we did not hear any direct experiences of discrimination or prejudice from our small sample of ethnic minority participants, we did hear very **diverse** experiences.
 - Some participants entered the legal process feeling confident and knowledgeable about what they needed. Others felt apprehensive and the landscape felt unfamiliar.
- While '**value for money**' was cited as a key criteria of importance, '**specialism**' of the legal team and '**recommendations**' from friends and family were also high on the list of needs.
- This shows just how much **reassurance** is required for ethnic minority consumers – simply put, without this it is **hard to know who to put your trust in**.

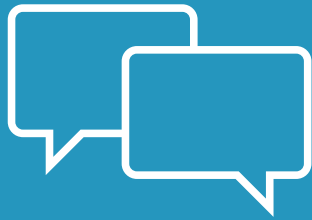
Executive Summary

- Exploring the experiences in more depth, even those who start the process feeling confident, still experience **negative emotions** such as **stress**, **worry** and **anxiety** throughout.
- Communication has a really big role to play here. The positive experiences were generally driven by a feeling of **responsive**, **professional**, two-way **communication**. The negative experiences lacked proactiveness and openness from the legal representative.
- But there is more to this than simply a lack of proactiveness. For ethnic minority consumers, it was clear that many did not feel **listened to**, did not feel **understood** and crucially, **did not feel heard**.
- Addressing **cultural** and **language barriers** and avoiding the overuse of **legal jargon** could help bridge **these gaps** and foster a more **open** and **empathetic relationship**. Consumers would also welcome a **support / liaison person** to help guide them through the process.

Research Findings



How does it feel to use legal
services for ethnic minority
consumers?



First impressions are generally positive - a profession that is highly regarded and highly skilled

- Impressions were of a profession that is:
 - Highly professional
 - Educated
 - Skilled
 - High quality
- There is a clear appreciation that this is a **highly skilled workforce** and legal services are there to benefit the general public.

"I reckon it is a rather benefitting sector to the public." **Mixed Heritage, Male**

"I have positive impressions as they solve issues which a layman would not be able to do ordinarily." **Black African, Female**

"I've previously had a good experience with people in the law profession, so what definitely comes to mind is, quality and confidentiality." **Mixed Heritage, Female**

"In general, when I think of legal services I think highly. Professionals who are highly educated and skilled." **Indian, Male**



But legal services are also approached with apprehension

- Along with this positive impression, comes an image of a profession that is **expensive** and **costly**. Simply put, the consumer is paying a **high price for these skills** and **expertise**.
- Given the costs and the high levels of personal emotions involved in seeking legal support, it is understandable that people from ethnic minorities approach legal services with **wariness** and **apprehension**.
- There is a question mark on who best to **'trust'**.

"I am not sure whether I 100% trust legal services; I feel like they get paid a lot of money and have their own interests at heart which for some is just to earn money." **Black Caribbean, Female**

"They are also easy to access and are helpful when you know which ones to use but can sometimes be daunting knowing which ones to trust." **Pakistani, Female**

"The first thing what comes to mind when thinking about legal services is stress." **Pakistani, Female**

"You need to be mindful and vigilant that they are providing a good and accurate service, because if they miss things, or are slow, they can seriously affect your livelihood!" **Indian, Male**

People from ethnic minorities can feel cautious and uncertain about using legal services

Some start the process feeling confident, clear of their needs, while others feel overwhelmed and confused – choice overload is a concern



Easy, straightforward, I know what I need

“The search felt good as I was confident from the beginning that I could get a result. I found the ability to drill-down and select the right operator to be the most difficult.” **Black African, Male**

Personal confidence in the process influenced by interconnected factors: nature of the case, number of times having used legal services before, health, type of legal services, whether seeking legal aid.



Overwhelmed, confused, need help

“I did feel slightly overwhelmed as the situation at work was affecting my mental health. The search was quite easy but it produced so many options that it was difficult to decide which one was the best for my situation.” **Black Caribbean, Female**

“It was definitely clear what needed to be done in regards to the legal services, it was just quite nerve-racking to begin with. I knew roughly what to search for and look for, it was quite extensive and in-depth. I did know what I wanted to achieve with it all. The search wasn't as stressful as I thought it would be. It was relatively easy for the most part, as long as you knew what kind of legal representation to look for, sector wise and such.” **Mixed Heritage, Female**

All experience a change in positive and negative emotions throughout the process

“I needed help from a legal service due to a family matter that became incredibly complicated over time. I had personally never had to consult one before, so it was quite **intimidating** at first. I was feeling **nervous**, **confident** and **happy** at the same time that someone took the time to listen and work on my behalf.” **Mixed Heritage, Female**

“Have had multiple contacts with legal services the last few years. One, I was an advocate and assistant, for a family member who had an ongoing dispute with a relative, and she needed assistance because she was finding it very **difficult** and **struggled** to engage with legal representatives, so I was an advocate. I felt OK but there was a **lot of information** to keep track of, so somewhat **anxious** too.” **Mixed Heritage, Female**

“Because I am used to working with the legal professionals [as a translator], I felt rather **relaxed** and **comfortable** talking to them. However, I can easily imagine that my wife would be very **stressed** and **apprehensive** since she has too much of a respect for them.” **Mixed Heritage, Male**

“I felt a little anxious, **thrown in at the deep end**, but at the same time **confident** that we were doing what needed to be done.” **Indian, Male**

Value for money is a key driver of importance, but specialism and recommendations are also essential

- From a list of 10 different attributes of legal services, '**value for money**' was felt to be the most important.
- Next from the list was being a **specialist** and that the legal representative came **recommended by friends or family**.

"I ultimately chose a legal firm that wasn't based locally, but I'd heard positive things and read great review about them. Even though the decision was mine to make, I did deliberate with my family and the friend I mentioned earlier." **Mixed Heritage, Male**

"I chose a solicitor that was recommended by a friend as they had experience of employment issues. I had searched on google and I think that the term that I used was 'bullying in the workplace' however I went with my friend's recommendation as there were too many options online." **Black Caribbean, Female**

"For me, the key factor was a personal recommendation as required a face to face service, so apart from a couple of phone calls, much of the emphasis was on a personal recommendation. Once we narrowed it down, we picked a local firm with pleasant looking surroundings, who had some expertise in what we were looking." **Indian, Male**

Significant reliance on friends and family to mitigate risks – it's hard to know who to trust

- Some participants described the personal challenges in finding the **right** legal team to meet their needs.
- Two key approaches to searching for legal services:
 - **Google / search engine**
 - **Word of mouth / recommendations**
- With few having previous relationships with legal firms to build on, **friends** and **family** were relied on as a means to **mitigate risks**, ease confusion and improve confidence in decision making.
 - Perceived to be 'in the know' and more experienced

"I firstly used Google and Bing to see who was local or of a high reputation. I searched for employment pay services. I felt confident that I would find someone who is very experienced in helping me." **Black African, Male**

"Initially I spoke to family and friends on what I should do, then I went through Citizen Advice to see how to apply for." **Pakistani, Female**

For some, **friends** and **family** remained a vital means of **support** throughout the process

Evelyn* experienced bullying in the workplace and this impacted her mental health. Her story speaks of feeling unsure in each step of the journey, benefitting from a friend by her side.

*"I felt quite apprehensive and nervous; **I wasn't sure whether I would be believed** and whether there would be any resolution....*

*I spent a lot of time Googling bullying at work to see what services were available however it wasn't until I spoke to a friend and **he suggested speaking to a solicitor** to see what my rights were in the situation that I decided that this was the route that I would take....*

*I did feel slightly overwhelmed as the situation at work was affecting my mental health. The search was quite easy but **it produced so many options** that it was difficult to decide which one was the best for my situation...*

*I chose a solicitor that was **recommended by a friend** as they had experience of employment issues. I had searched on Google and I think that the term that I used was 'bullying in the workplace' however **I went with my friend's recommendation** as there were too many options online...*

*Throughout the call **I wasn't 100% confident or trusting** as I have never experienced legal services providing me or anyone that I know with true guidance and support...*

*I think that the whole process felt quite generic, there was the standard question of how long I had worked there and then the **advice given was basically to deal with it or find something else** as I had no rights. I was hoping to find a way to stay in my role but it didn't feel like an option as my mental health would have been damaged further if I continued in a role that was making me so unhappy with no change to the situation. I was hoping that the solicitor would be able to advise my rights but it turned out I didn't have any ...*

*I didn't feel like I was going to get a fair outcome, **I felt like I didn't have any rights** and that my boss who was bullying me would get away with it...*

*The tone and level of professionalism met my expectations however the outcome did not; I was hoping that the solicitor would be able **to help me to get justice....***

*I wanted to feel listened to, **I wanted to feel like someone understood my situation** and wanted to help but instead it felt like I was a number and speed rather than anything else was the priority..."*

Evelyn's story...



Friend suggested exploring legal options

Situation impacted mental health

Undesirable outcome

**names changed to protect identity of participants*

Paul's Story...

Paul* is a professional living in a city centre who is regularly travelling internationally with work and speaks multiple languages. Paul speaks of straight forward processes, good communication and the impact of having prior experience of legal professionals.

*"Well, apart from the time it took to look at and deal with my case (due to COVID restrictions which was understandable), I was very satisfied with everything else, especially with the **professionalism and the patience** of my solicitor..."*

*...I am **used to working with the legal professionals**, I felt rather relaxed and comfortable talking to them. However, I can easily imagine that my wife would be very stressed and apprehensive **since she has too much of a respect for them...***

*...The whole process was **explained to me in a transparent and plain way** and when I wasn't certain about something and ended up asking twice / thrice, it was repeatedly explained with patience...*

*...The team indeed constantly kept asking me if they need to be aware of any specific terms that could be offensive to my central European culture and even though I reassured them that it's all fine, they were very wary of how they were expressing themselves and at times were even apologetic when they didn't need to be! **I appreciated that** though - it went to show that **they were culturally aware** of dealing with clients from various backgrounds."*



Positive perceptions of legal professionals but not on a pedestal

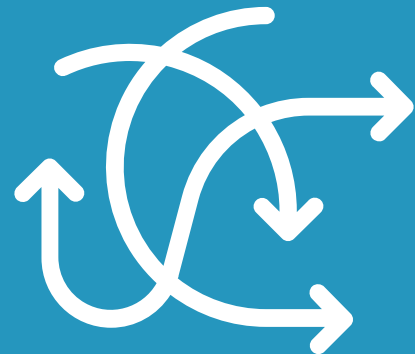
Cultural sensitivity is demonstrated

Engagement with wider legal team

Confident to ask questions

**names changed to protect identity of participants*

What were the experiences
of ethnic minority legal
consumers?



The experience can feel very professional and proactive

- Some participants described their experience as very professional, especially when:
 - **Detailed knowledge** of the case was demonstrated
 - **Communication** was **timely** and **responsive**
- In fact proactiveness and openness of **communication** and **clarity of information sent** and **received** came through as the most positive aspects of the legal services experience.

“What particularly impressed me was the fact that I didn't have to think about ringing the firm for any updates, they kept me up to date on a regular basis! That is pretty rare and I appreciated that! What was also awesome was the fact that even when my solicitor wasn't always available, he appointed a deputy assistant who was well informed about my case too so I could discuss the matter with them when needed.” **Mixed Heritage, Male**

“What mattered for me was the level of communication. It was the fact that I was receiving not just email responses but follow-up calls. So when I had an employee pay dispute with the payroll department of my former firm it was the speed of the response that let me know that I was a priority.” **Indian, Male**

Receiving proactive, prompt communication goes a long way to build trust

Generally, ethnic minority men had more positive experiences

Ethnic minority men felt the most confident throughout the process. This requires more detailed investigation to determine if gender within ethnicity plays a significant factor in experiences.



"The process was quite pleasant in that **they were taking notes**, making calls, and following up with all parties. I felt that I was being considered as a client rather than profit." **Indian, Male**

"The whole process was explained to me in a **transparent and plain** way and when I wasn't certain about something and ended up asking twice / thrice, it was repeatedly **explained with patience**." **Mixed heritage, Male**

"I was **confident** that they could get the job done in an **acceptable time frame**." **Mixed heritage, Male**

"I received **all the help** I needed, every step of the way." **Mixed heritage, Male**

"They **understood my situation** at the initial meeting. A letter, and email, was sent to the other party within 2 days, and the **matter was resolved** within 3 weeks." **Mixed heritage, Male**

"I would say it **exceeded my expectation** as I thought I wouldn't get any positive response from my claim." **Indian, Male**

Gurdeep* describes elements of anxiety but overall, used legal services with confidence and trust. Gurdeep knew what he needed from the service. He was confident that he selected a legal service that could meet his needs and actively ensure he received the best service possible.

"I have had **multiple contacts** with legal services the last few years. Once, I was an **advocate** and assistant, for a family member who had an ongoing dispute with a relative, and she needed assistance because she was finding it very difficult and struggled to engage with legal representatives, so I was an advocate. I felt OK but there was **a lot of information to keep track of**, so somewhat anxious too..... I felt a little anxious, thrown in at the deep end, but at the same time confident that we were **doing what needed to be done...**

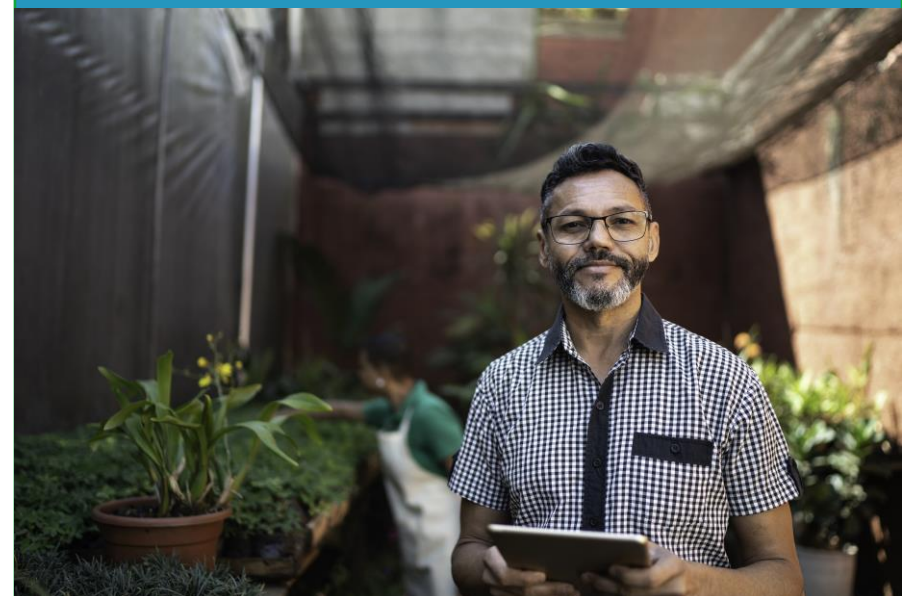
It was stressful for long periods, but **ultimately did get resolved** OK and we knew it had to be done...

It was **clear what was required** and I began searching the local area within a specific radius. This is because I knew we would likely be required to travel back and forth, and so didn't want it too far away, as a long journey maybe would increase stress levels **dealing with lots of important information**. Once we had a couple of ideas I simply **asked around** my immediate circle, and received a positive recommendation of a good and thorough local company, so went with them. I **didn't find it too much hassle**, though I read a lot of books and watch documentaries related to legal cases, so have a basic knowledge of legal principles and terminology. So I **didn't find it too bad**.

I personally didn't find it massively difficult or challenging. Possibly this is because we live in an area which is somewhat well represented by the courts and legal system, and there are **several well reviewed firms** in the area. Also I have at least **rudimentary knowledge** of legal systems and terminology, so can converse quite well with legal representatives.

I did feel **confident and trusting throughout**. Company behaved very well, with **just the right amount** of detail & legal jargon..... you need to be **mindful and vigilant** that they are providing a good and accurate service because if they miss things, or are slow, they can seriously affect your livelihood!"

Gurdeep's story



Knowledgeable of foundational legal principles

Experienced in engaging with legal professionals

Options and boundaries were explained

**names changed to protect identity of participants*

For others, the experience can feel stressful particularly when there is a lack communication

- Other people described their experiences as:
 - **Unresponsive** (difficult to get hold of)
 - **Bureaucratic**
- This could leave some ethnic minority consumers feeling stressed and anxious.

“My opinion of the legal profession is that of bureaucracy at all levels including those that defend clients (customer-facing) to those that aid in more areas such as a solicitor. I feel as those it is slow moving and treats the area of change and technology with apprehension. They are expensive but also not always value generating.” **Indian, Male**

“When we were first meant to get our documents but didn’t receive them on time it made me doubt the solicitors and how professional they may be. The procedure was also taking longer than expected which was frustrating.” **Pakistani, Female**

“I feel like sometimes it is hard to get hold of them and communicate with them once we are using them.” **Pakistani, Female**

“If felt alright, however, since I didn’t know whether I will be actually helped, I have to admit that there was definitely some anxiety there too.” **Mixed Heritage, Male**

Receiving active, prompt communication goes a long way to build trust

“I wanted to feel listened to, I wanted to feel like someone understood my situation and wanted to help but instead it felt like I was a number and speed rather than anything else was the priority.”

Black Caribbean, Female

Some ethnic minority consumers felt there was a real lack of understanding of their needs and their situation

- Beyond the lack of prompt communication, we also heard examples where ethnic minority consumers did not feel that **their case / situation** had been fully **understood** by their legal representative.
- Simply put, they did **not feel listened** to, especially when:
 - Their case and their situation was not felt to be a priority
 - There was a lack of **empathy / understanding** of their issues and needs

“In my opinion it's paramount to be dealing with someone empathetic and genuinely willing to help.”
Mixed Heritage, Male

“I would want the professionalism to continue and I would want more of 'being seen and understood'. I would want less of feeling like a number rather than a person.” **Black Caribbean, Female**

In short, some ethnic minority legal consumers do not feel **heard**

Atia* contacted legal services when she didn't feel her son's needs were being met when staying at his father's. Atia did not feel her story was valued or understood by her legal representatives and this subsequently impacted how she felt using legal services.

"I didn't feel comfortable at all, I was there trying to explain my side of the story, the reason why I left my son's father [sic.], how his relationship was with my son, explaining how my son's needs were not met under the care of his father and due to this I would have preferred supervised visitation, but I felt all this was being disregarded..."

In the personal statement, as I read it, all this that I told them was brushed off, not fully explained. Then within the hearing itself, I was told to roughly explain my side. But the situation cannot be 'roughly' explained. In order to make an appropriate decision, all views and medical forms and pictures I had taken should have counted also. But none of this was. There were many more concerns I had which were also treated the same...

Regardless of actually being interested in the whole story, they could have acted like there was some interest in my side...I thought I knew the process and had a rough idea on what the outcome may be. I believed everyone's story and background will be taken into consideration, but unfortunately my side and my son's was not. My son's medical background and his father past towards these was not made clear in court."

Atia did not feel the nuances of her situation were understood. She felt a lack of insight into some issues faced by Muslim women prevented the legal representative from being able to reflect the pressures being faced whilst in court.

"A lot of the information I gave, was not conveyed within my personal statement.

I explained to them, [that my son was] having his whole routine disrupted.

I also tried to explain [some of the difficulties we were having at home due to our religious background].

With me explaining all this in such detail, in the personal statement it just stated "I had some issues". These were more than issues."

****quotes edited for purposes of clarity**

Atia's story



Facing a complex, emotive family conflict

Perceived vital options being missed

Desire for detail of situation to be reflected in court proceedings

***names changed to protect identity of participants**

Cultural and language barriers and overuse of professional and legal jargon impact the experience

- This lack of understanding and empathy is in part driven by experiencing **cultural** and **language barriers** between the consumer and the legal representative.
- This has potential to create **distance** between the consumer and the legal team.
- In addition, the overuse of **legal jargon** could result in ethnic minority consumers feeling alienated.
- There was a desire for **more open** and **plain English** to be used within communications.

“This is a tough one - since I speak fluent English, I didn't have any issues, however, I can imagine that some non-English speakers could certainly struggle (if legal aid is provided, the interpretation service is automatically there), however, if the individual has to pay from their own pocket, this would add extra stress and expenses if they didn't have anyone in the family or close network that would be willing to help.” **Mixed Heritage, Male.**

“The changes I'd like to see, that definitely has to be open communication about what it all entails, how to seek legal help in a variety of circumstances and situations. I believe it's a group effort not just from a personal standpoint or view, but also the professional one.” **Mixed Heritage, Female**

Example of ethnic minority legal consumers not feeling heard

Ethnic minority consumers would benefit from ‘buddy’ support to bridge cultural gaps

- As a result of the language barriers and potential cultural gaps, many felt there needed to be more support offered in bridging these gaps.
- People described this as a ‘*support worker*’, ‘*liaison*’ or a ‘*buddy*’ that would be on hand to support individuals throughout the process

“I have interpreted for families that were provided with legal aid (this was incredibly beneficial for them since it not only saved them money, but also put them at ease knowing they will be correctly heard and represented).” **Mixed Heritage, Male**



“I believe there should be a support worker or someone along the line who is there from the beginning, all the way to the end. This would be someone who could make sense of everything going on.. and be able to support you throughout the case. Have that personal touch. Explain the lingo used, if law lingo is hard to follow. Even possible just for some form of moral support.” **Pakistani, Female**

Recommendations

“I believe that is what makes a person in the legal profession stand out, is when they genuinely care and want to help you no matter what.”

Mixed Heritage, Male

Recommendations – breaking down cultural barriers



Working out ways to address the trust gap

Finding ways to reach into ethnic minority communities to build connections and trust, so not everyone is reliant on search engines or word of mouth.

“Making it more openly available for those who need it is crucial. Legal aid also needs to change because it can be a barrier for those who don't understand how it all works etc.” **Mixed Heritage, Female**



Support workers / buddy schemes

Use of support or liaison workers could offer much needed support on language and cultural barriers throughout process.

“I believe organising some form of support relief or worker within some cases, is a positive. I would highly recommend this being brought up. If anything it will give clients more assurance and hope.” **Pakistani, Female**



Simple to understand / plain English

Simplify communications, more proactiveness, demonstrate genuine listening to and understanding of needs.

“The changes I'd like to see, that definitely has to be open communication about what it all entails, how to seek legal help in a variety of circumstances and situations. I believe it's a group effort not just from a personal standpoint or view, but also the professional one.” **Mixed Heritage, Female**



Demonstrate greater empathy and understanding

Hear the needs and situations of ethnic minority consumers and why they matter.

“Be more **compassionate** and show empathy and not present as judgmental but an appraisal of possible outcome and the process to achieve each goal.” **Chinese, Female**

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This project has been delivered to ISO 9001:2015, 20252:2019 and 27001:2013 standards.

