

***Submission to the examination of the United Kingdom's 7th periodic report to  
the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights***

*from*

*End Child Poverty Coalition*

*&*

*(a project of ATD Fourth World and Teen Advocacy)*

*Youth Voices*

## About us

**The End Child Poverty Coalition** <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/> is a coalition made up of over 120 organisations from civic society including children's charities, child welfare organisations, social justice groups, faith groups, trade unions and others, united in a vision of a UK free of child poverty.

**Youth Voices** (a project of ATD Fourth World <https://atd-uk.org/> and Teen Advocacy <https://teenadvocacy2020.wordpress.com/>) originated from the need of children and young people with lived experience of poverty and social service interventions to have a say in the conversation concerning their lives. These children and young people have been silenced by systems. *ATD Fourth World* is a human rights-based anti-poverty organisation with 60 years of experience tackling inequality and promoting social justice in the UK. *Teen Advocacy* are independent peer advocates who offer support for young offenders, young carers, teens with disabilities and those experiencing complex family dynamics or divorce. **Youth Voices'** vision is a world where the views of children with lived experience are valued and respected by all adults and where teens get a say about the trajectory of their lives.

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It was supported by Diana Skelton of ATD Fourth World; Lyle Barker of the University of Essex Human Rights Centre; Omar Mohamed, an activist with lived experience of children's services, a children and families social worker with [Frontline](#) working at a Local Authority in the South East of England and Dr Gill Main, founder of the [Social Research Collective](#), researcher and lived-experience officer for [Victim Support](#). The research for this submission was funded by ATD Fourth World. The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission has awarded a travel grant to Youth Voices to participate in the UK's 7th periodic ICESCR review.

We would like for this submission to be read with an understanding that this document was thought out, researched, planned, written and edited by people with lived experience of poverty, ranging from: young activists with lived experience; to academics with lived experience; to practitioners such as youth workers and social workers with lived experience. This makes our submission invaluable as we believe that effective social change will only come when people with lived experience are part of the conversation.

## Executive summary

This report looks at issues concerning Articles 2, 10, and 11, by sharing what children and young people have told us about violations to these rights. This report follows up on our last report that identified human rights violations with the aim to provide solutions. In reflecting on the response that the UK Government gave to the UN's list of issues, we acknowledge where they have made steps forward while pointing out that there are still on-going issues. Furthermore, we look at the current state of the UK in relation to the care system and how poverty impacts it.

This report provides recommendations based on our recent work with children and young people as well as including on our previous report to CESCR. We recommend that the UK government:

- Co-design with children, young people and their families policies specifically aimed at preventing povertyism within children's social care:
  - This should include teaching professionals that **poverty is not neglect**, which will help them to develop an understanding that families in poverty deserve support rather than separation. This training for social work professionals should be co-created and run by those with lived experience of poverty who can provide insight about the realities of how poverty impacts family life. This will help professionals to distinguish indicators of poverty from indicators of neglect.
  - When the UK enacts the socio-economic duty, its statutory guidance should also be co-designed to ensure that all policies, procedures and practices take into account and act on the impacts of poverty and povertyism in children's social care.
- When it is safe and appropriate, prefer **kinship care** as the more compassionate and advantageous way forward instead of pursuing contested closed adoptions, and look for ways to support families whenever possible, leaving separation of a child from their family as a last resort.
- To address the **emotional harm and erosion of emotional trust** caused by children's social care:
  - Increase the **accountability** of professionals and alternative care providers.
  - Include in formation surrounding the **context of families** in all children's social care notes and reports in order to inform decision-making and accurately reflect and humanise the family.
  - Place emphasis on the importance of **supporting and empowering families** through their interactions with children's social care.
  - Empower children so they can **advocate** for themselves and have control over their lives.

## Introduction

The issues we will discuss in this submission concern:

- a) Article 10(1), which declares that *“the widest possible **protection and assistance should be accorded to the family**”*;
- b) Article 10(3), which states that *“special measures of protection and assistance should be taken on behalf of all children and young persons **without any discrimination for reasons of parentage or other conditions**”*.

The consequences of the infringements of these rights cannot be analysed in isolation, thus we will also be touching on:

- c) Article 11(1), the right to an **adequate standard of living**, which includes *“adequate food, clothing and housing”*;
- d) And Article 2(2), which articulates that the rights under the Covenant *“will be exercised **without discrimination of any kind**”*, specifically looking at discrimination on the grounds of socioeconomic status, also known as povertyism.

These human rights, as we know, are indivisible, therefore one cannot enjoy one set of rights fully without the enjoyment of the other rights. Similar to a jenga tower, they are interconnected, and once you take one out, the others collapse. As stated by the UN Commission on Human Rights, “extreme poverty involves the denial, not of a single right or a given category of rights, but of human rights as a whole [and...] extreme poverty is thus a particularly clear illustration of the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights”.<sup>1</sup> This is why we believe that learning from the struggles of people living in poverty is of urgency for compliance with the International Covenant of ECSR.

Following our submission to the CESCR PSWG on the list of issues in January 2023, we want to reiterate the ongoing realities of young people and families in poverty in the UK who are disproportionately subjected to harsh interventions by children’s social care, which often leads to the removal of children into State care or contested closed adoptions. It is important for the committee to understand that families living in poverty face intersectional discrimination which leads to children’s social care making severe and sometimes unfounded judgements, including a misconception of poverty as neglect. In this context, loving parents are scrutinised as though they have harmed their children; when in truth poverty is harm perpetrated by the state, which has not offered parents the support they need to provide for their children. There are more details about these issues in the submissions to CESCR from ATD Fourth World with the University of Birmingham and Human Rights Local, and from the Growing Rights Instead of Poverty Partnership ([GRIPP](#)).

Throughout this submission we will shed light on the voices of children and young people with lived experience of poverty whose rights have been violated. In addition, these young people propose solutions to ensure an end to these infringements to protect future generations. The quotations throughout the submission come from focus groups and interviews that we carried out in November and December 2022 in Scotland and England, from our 2021 work for the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and also from a study group carried out in March 2023 in London focused on solutions emerging from lived-experienced young people. Some quotations have been anonymised to protect our participants.

## Responding to the UN’s list of issues

We are pleased that CESCR has given consideration to the fundamental need to ‘regulate and monitor private and for-profit providers of child protection services in the State party’. We are also pleased that CESCR took seriously our concerns about adequate accommodation and protection measures for children under the age of 18 who have been deprived of a family environment and placed in unregulated alternative care or residential care homes.<sup>2</sup> We celebrate the influence it has had on the UK Government to implement some change; however, there remain unresolved key questions we would like the UK government to address, which this submission will explore below.

## Responding to the UK Government's Response to the List of Issues

We welcome the Government's reply to the list of issues in relation to its seventh periodic report on 30th of August 2024. Specifically, we appreciate the government's initiatives to implement regulations to set national standards and registration for what were unregulated supported accommodation for 16- and 17-year-old looked-after children and care leavers (Paragraph 199).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, we celebrate the prohibition on placing 16 to 18 year olds in unregistered accommodation, with a plan for regular inspections of these accommodations by Ofsted (Paragraphs 200 and 201). In addition, we are hopeful about the new Government's pledge to enact the socio-economic duty (s.1 Equality Act 2010). However, their response failed to address some of our other concerns, discussed below.

About regulation and monitoring of private and for-profit providers of child protection services, paragraph 195 calls for local social services authority to take steps that ensure, "so far as reasonably practicable", that they are able to provide accommodation in their area that meets the needs of children who are looked after by them. Whilst we do understand this point of reasonability, we do query what is meant by 'reasonably practicable', as this could be both personally and organisationally interpreted differently based on a number of factors. As well, shortages, for example, of suitable housing should not be a barrier for individuals to have their needs met. We heard from our participants this has not always been met: "I was moved to an abusive foster family. And to the point where I ran, I ended up from 15 being put into a men's hostel. And things went worse from there."

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous.*

About **reforming unregulated placements**, paragraph 202 cites a national sector awareness and provider preparedness programme which ran from March 2023–March 2024. We would like to know what the outcomes of this programme were and where this information is available to be seen. This issue is not a one time thing but much longer term; therefore it would be useful to understand what the longer term plans are, and how the conversation around awareness will carry on. Although awareness is crucial, it needs to be acted upon. Consequently, it would be good to understand what actions may come from this programme.

About **regulating children's homes**, paragraph 203, restates the standards and inspections that have been in place since 2015. However, from what children tell us, these standards are not always being met. We feel that further work needs to be done on the inspections to make sure standards are being met for all individuals.

Finally, in the UK government response there is nothing around social work and social work practice, or the wider social care sector in terms of children and young people. This feels like a massive gap, given that our January 2023 submission gave clear evidence of some major failings in this area and the impact they have had on children and on those they care about.

## Current UK situation

### 1. While poverty is rising, povertyism continues to impact the assessments and interventions carried out by children's social care in the UK

**"It's like being poor is a crime. Why? Because when you're poor, your children will look dirty, maybe because the washing machine is broken down, you can't afford [to fix it]. Whereas the rich person doesn't have that problem, and their kids and their house will always look clean. It doesn't matter if they're not even there. It doesn't show love."**

*Expert-by-experience, Lareine M.*

**“Exactly. They can afford for people to come clean the house, they can afford a new washing machine. And this thing makes me feel like [it’s] just superficial. Basically the poor are blamed.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**“And it hasn't been seen as struggling for money. It's been seen as neglecting. [...] And if things are not tackled as soon as possible, then we end up with disaster and children being taken away.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

Poverty in the UK has intensified. As stated by the UK Parliament, ‘the number of people in food-insecure households rose by around 2.5 million people between 2021/22 and 2022/23, from 4.7 million to 7.2 million. This means 11% of people lived in food insecure households in 2022/23, including 17% of children.’<sup>4</sup> Through these staggering statistics, we bear witness to the fact that poverty grips a large proportion of the UK population.

Statistics from the government’s Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) show that 1.6 million children are currently affected by the two-child limit to benefit payments which means that their families receive benefits for only two of their children. One in nine children in the UK are denied to their right to social security.<sup>5</sup>

Signs of poverty are often mistaken for neglect by professionals. Too often they see children going without and they believe that the parents are choosing to not meet their children’s needs rather than acknowledging that society has failed the family and they are doing the best they can.

**“There was a time where my washing machine broke and I approached the social worker. She couldn't do nothing directly, she had to go to the panel with a case. And this will usually take so much time. In the meantime, you are struggling, because I don't wash, it's piling up. I was thinking, what if this social worker was allocated an amount of money to let her sort out prices without having to go through bureaucracy. And I think that also would ease a lot of pressure and limit the damage, just to be able to access a quick fund for basics.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

The Child Welfare Inequalities Project 2018 report states that “[c]hildren who live in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods are ten times more likely to be looked after or on a child protection plan, than children in the least deprived 10% of areas.”<sup>6</sup> They go on to report that: “Each 10% increase in deprivation rates saw a 30% rise in a child’s chances of entering care”.<sup>7</sup> In England, child protection interventions have grown significantly in number in the last ten to fifteen years. Between 2009-10 and 2021-22, we have seen a 136.3% increase in child protection enquiries in England under section 47 of the Children Act 1989.<sup>8</sup> In March 2024, 83,630 children in England were reported as being looked after by the state, meaning they were removed from their parents.<sup>9</sup> Of these, 55,190 (66%) were removed on the basis of children being at risk of abuse or neglect.<sup>10</sup> Since our last submission 2 years ago, we have seen an increase of 1,950 more children being removed a year.<sup>11</sup> These figures exclude children who are looked after under a series of short-term placements and children who re-entre care.

An example of povertyism in children’s social care is seen in the North of England, which has a higher rate of poverty than the rest of the country. Research undertaken by the End Child Poverty Coalition in June 2024 proved that in the “North East “89% of all constituencies have at least one in four children growing up in poverty.”<sup>12</sup> There is a direct correlation between families living in poverty and children being placed into care. We can see this in ‘Children in Care in the North of England’ research, which stated that “The North accounts for 28% of the child population, but 36% of the children in care.”<sup>13</sup>

Child poverty is family poverty. Understanding this through the lens of material deprivation is looking at the situation simplistically, poverty torments individuals forever, deteriorates their physical and mental health, it leaves them feeling trapped in their situation without a shadow of hope.<sup>14</sup> The true image of someone living in poverty can be distorted via dominant discourses in the media and the judgment, stigma and blame spirals from here into all walks of life. Special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, brought the term “povertyism” to the United Nations, urging for it to be included in anti-discrimination law adjacent to sexism and racism.<sup>15</sup> Without this terminology and recognition, poverty, and its harsh outcomes will continue to exist.

**“Poverty and struggling with money can have impacts on social services when you're in those situations.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Francesca Crozier-Roche.*

**“It looks like the whole system is against the poor. When you are poor you are more prone to have problems with social services compared to the wealthy.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Lareine M.*

- 2. The contested closed adoptions that are common in the UK permanently sever children's ties with their entire extended families and communities, which has a negative impact on children's sense of their own identity.**

**“We need to remember that this thing is not temporary. Whatever is done will affect that child. If it's negative, then that is damaging for a long time.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

Research shows that out of the children placed in adoption in 2022, 90% were adopted **without** consent<sup>16</sup>. As presented in our last report, there is a clear **correlation between contested closed adoption and living in poverty**. Poverty is multidimensional<sup>17</sup>. It goes beyond material deprivation and lack of money. Living in poverty means disempowerment, discrimination (both social and institutional), and damaged health<sup>18</sup>. It means suffering in heart, body and mind. The systems that are designed to help them are not only failing but are punishing them.

Contested closed adoptions not only remove children without the consent of their parents but also typically prevent them from having any direct contact with their biological family or knowing their history. As social work academics Ward and Smeeton point out, contested closed adoptions are an abnormality in Europe, with the UK being an anomaly *“In almost all other European countries adoption is a consensual process, whereas in the UK parental agreement can be dispensed with. [...] The process of compulsory adoption is further damaging already vulnerable people. [...]”*<sup>19</sup>.

Institutions such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have recommended avoiding abusive practices such as adoptions without parental consent; however the UK government still continues their use of forced adoption routinely.<sup>20</sup>

**“[W]e worry about the risk of our children being removed from their family. We've seen our children be endangered or treated like slaves by carers the court assigned them to. We've seen our children get physically abused by adopters we had a bad feeling about, but we were ignored. Social workers have blinkers that come down when we speak and they just don't want to know. We do know what our children need, but we're not listened to by carers or social workers.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

Children are being forcibly moved away from their homes, from their communities, from everything and everyone that they love. Cut off from their roots and loved ones, their parents and siblings, it is not surprising that there are bleak outcomes that can come from contested closed adoptions. Crittenden and Spieker researched the negative effects: *‘Notably, these outcomes are the same that result from child maltreatment, parental mental illness, traumatizing events, etc. That is, children display distress in several familiar ways that do not link stressors and signs of distress to specific eliciting conditions. The outcomes include poor mental and behavioral health as indicated by internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety, withdrawal), externalizing behaviors (e.g., physical aggression, relational aggression, defiance, theft, and vandalism), and social and cognitive difficulties resulting in poor self-control, difficult peer relations, and poor school performance.’*<sup>21</sup>

Closed adoptions can be extremely harmful for the children who are being separated from their families, affecting their mental and physical health including their sense of identity.

**“We should have the right to know our own stories — it harms us when information is kept from us. [My sister told me] you can't go see your mum, because the court won't let you.... Then I found out I had another brother and sister, but I only found out about them when they were about the same age that we went into care, because they were going into care. But they were allowed to still see my mum, when I wasn't. My mum ended up passing away in 2019, so it was like for so long, the court told me I wasn't allowed to see her. Now, I actually can't see her.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**“Children are meant to have a right to an identity. But if you're adopted, the government and your adoptive parents totally legally change that identity. They delete the previous identity.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Gill Main.*

When separation is necessary, it can often be more beneficial for children to be placed in **kinship care**. Coram Voice and The Rees Centre, University of Oxford, have undertaken an original study which draws comparisons between the wellbeing of children and young people in kinship foster care and unrelated foster care. Young people in kinship foster care reported “positively that the things they did in life were worthwhile. Having a sense of purpose and meaning in life is an important indicator of positive functioning and a protective factor against risky behaviours.”<sup>22</sup>

It was illustrated in the ‘Out of the Shadows’ report that “for every 10,000 children who are diverted from local authority care into well-supported kinship care, the state saves £370 million.”<sup>23</sup> Unless it opposes the child’s best interest, kinship care is the more compassionate and advantageous way forward. We must not forget that the consequences of separation are lifelong. It is important to note that prevention is better than cure. If we move the focus from the ongoing children’s social care investigations, foster care outcomes, court hearings, all of which are costly, to support and services for families and communities, we will be avoiding a multitude of harms.

**“It's a damaging system, a damaging process. Even if it was done in the best way possible, there's still damage. [There should be] recognition of lifelong impacts. I have lifelong trauma. It's made some of my disabilities worse, for example. It does make your life harder in one way or another.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Tiegan Boyens.*

**Because social services can be so quick to remove children, families often face constant judgement and the very real fear that they may lose their children: “It just does feel like a kind of constant scrutiny or you're not good enough for doing very basic things or having a life.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Tiegan Boyens.*

**There should have been “enough financial and emotional support so my parents didn't give up.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**Taking a supportive approach does not cost you anything, “When a child is taken into foster care, that amount of money, if that money could just have helped before, there would have been changes. Instead of taking the children away, removing them from their nest—it's like triple damage, because removing them really doesn't help.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Lareine M.*

**We should “be treated as a human being with rights and have professionals who understand.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*



**3. Emotional harm is caused and institutional trust is eroded by children's social care investigations carried out without accountability to children themselves and written into documentation that lacks contextualisation.**

*"Up to four decades after their initial care assessment, care-experienced people are more likely to die earlier than their peers, of causes related to self-harm, poor mental health, behaviours and accidents."*<sup>24</sup>

The process of being investigated by children's social care—including when investigations conclude that children have not been harmed by their parents—involves anguish and trauma for the entire family. This emotional harm follows children into their adult lives:

**"The way we get treated affects us. Like I still can't trust nearly anyone. I can trust to a level, but I can't get beyond that level. And because of that, it affects my relationships, friendships, people, and they don't get it. I don't get it, because I just can't get beyond it. And that is because of how social services treat us."**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

In a study group we organised, not one participant thought that they could trust social workers in general, although one added:

**"It's not the social workers, it's the system I don't trust. They can be amazing social workers, but they still have to go by certain rules in the system."**

*Expert-by-experience, Christian Joseph.*

Trust is tarnished, especially towards those in positions of power who are supposed to be reliable figures. The quotes above are a pin drop in the ocean, small glimmers of the brutal reality that families face when going through children's social care investigations. It comes without surprise that the constant intrusion of children's social care in young people's lives leads to a **breakdown of trust**. Children are expected to automatically trust professionals of all kinds; however, when they feel this trust has been betrayed, it can erode their sense of trust in all adults.

**"Young people are being betrayed by the adults they are made to trust."**

*Expert-by-experience, Ivana M.*

**"Social workers don't really talk to children or explain anything at all. They just walk into your life and, 'oh, here are these adults with power over us and I have no idea what they're doing'. They tell you they're doing it for your own good. Not that they explain what they think that is or how this helps meet that. They just expect you to put up with them. Our trust in professionals is destroyed because of the way professionals treated our family. That doesn't just affect us. My children will never trust professionals, and probably their children as well."**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

The mistrust in professionals not only creates distress, but has wider harmful consequences, like not seeking needed help from doctors or police. This in turn can result in physical and mental harm.

**"I was taken off my dad by the police. That was a very stressful, traumatic time. So of course I linked it with the people that had picked me up and taken me away. Ever since, I've had a thing about police officers or security guards: I can't go within a certain radius of them without going into fight-or-flight mode. [...] That first impact of mistrust is so natural that you can't have any control over it. Now we have a generation of certain kids who are fearful of police officers, and that just isn't good."**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**“Doctors referred our family to social services. And so in my head that means I just can't trust them, which is really not great because now I won't go to the doctor of my own choice.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

Thus, this mistrust is not only towards specific people in isolation but directed towards the wider environment that is designed to support children. This leads to children being afraid to ask for help and afraid of the very services set up in their name.



Dear Social worker, I don't want to see you on  
Tuesday I'm sick of covering up I'm tired of  
feeling invaded I'm tired of your lies Sometimes  
I'm angry and I'm livid Sometimes I'm ready to  
explode Sometimes I am ready to stop being my  
best self

So I don't want to see you on Tuesday  
'Cause I don't need your help  
Help shouldn't hurt this much.  
And there are many things you could change  
But you don't care about listening to me  
I was always taught that I am valuable  
But with you, I don't feel anything  
but I want love,  
I don't want to cry  
Don't want to feel this fear inside  
Don't want to wake up and hurt like this  
I want to sing,  
I want to dance  
I want to feel safe and secure.  
I just want you to go away.  
I don't want to see you on Tuesday  
I want my home to be mine again  
Together, our family has a good life  
We don't need inference and judgement  
We could do with more money  
But we can make do and get by without you

We don't get a choice  
So, I will see you on Tuesday  
And try to be nice.

Kat, 14



**4. The need for children to directly hold professionals accountable:** Professionals often make decisions without including input from families. In addition to permanently damaging children's trust, this can lead to decisions that are not right for the family. In one situation we know of two brothers were asked by social workers which adult they would prefer to live with; but their choice was not respected:

**“How is that acceptable? They don’t listen to children, even though they’re saying that they have the choice.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**“My opinion was never relevant. It was just decided for me.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Christian Joseph.*

**“It’s so easy for social workers, or people who are reporting to local authorities or whoever, to kind of say that they’re listening to children and young people. But then there’s just endless excuses of why that’s not practical, or ‘we can’t do that’.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Gill Main.*

It is not just professionals that need to be held accountable to children; there are many instances where care providers such as foster parents have caused harm to those they care for, as researched by Yoshioka-Maxwell and Biehal.<sup>26</sup> Often these care providers—called ‘corporate parents’ in the UK—have done things that would have led to a child being removed from their own birth family.

**“When I was 15, I was put into a hostel with fully grown men. I had to share a room with a heroin addict. This is where I was meant to be studying for my GCSE. So I was forced into prostitution in the hostel and forced into drugs. It was a nightmare. While I was meant to be doing my GCSEs, I was doing something that no child should be doing. But prior to that, I was getting high marks in school. So if I’d had the opportunity to be in a place where I could study and revise, I would have got my GCSEs and I probably would have been able to get to university. But because social services put me in a place that wasn’t suitable, I was denied that opportunity.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**“If that was a parent or a carer putting a teenager in those bad positions, it would absolutely be weaponized as harm, abuse, exploitation. And the list goes on. However, for a ‘corporate parent’, there’s never any accountability with professionals, and I think it’s infuriating.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Francesca Crozier-Roche.*

**“No one ends up being held accountable. And there’s no way that people end up learning from or improving afterwards. How might that stop?”**

*Expert-by-experience, Aurelia Drayak.*

**5. Children’s social care documentation:** When children turn 18 they are shown their social care file containing notes, reports and decisions concerning professional interactions with their families. This documentation is written only from the point of view of professionals and fails to reflect the views of families about their experiences which often include erratic and unreasonable treatment and demands due to misrepresentation of their needs, experiences, and of their very humanity.

In reports, **“there was never that context put, of traumatic situations that already happened to teens. It’s just very much: ‘Bad behaviour.’ End of story. When instead, they could write: ‘She’s going to have attachment issues and trauma, because of X Y Z.’”**

*Expert-by-experience, Tiegan Boyens.*

**“The solution would be if you make a note of something, you have to write the context around it: that context, the scenario, and also understanding when children have extra needs or issues or whatever else.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Gill Main.*

This context would be key to developing understanding: **“They should see there’s not just one way to be a good parent, or to be a good family. The vast majority of families, despite all the challenges, they’re mostly doing really well and trying really hard.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**“You have to see people for the people they are, not the situation they're in, and also treat each child as an individual and see them for who they are.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Taliah Drayak.*

**6. The role of children's social care:** There is a need to change the role of children's social care, as it is currently failing families.

**“It often feels like they are against the family waiting to punish them when they ‘fail’.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**“When you go to have your own children, literally social services are around you like a magnifying glass. It's like they're waiting for you to make a mistake. Instead, maybe kind of actually support them as a parent, rather than looking for them to fail.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Christian Joseph.*

**“Siblings are not responsible for the actions of our parents, but we're punished, you know? [...] If they're going to take children away, what are the considerations for [siblings] to be a family together as children?”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

Individuals with lived experience feel strongly that children's social care would help families better if they provided support to families, offering a more caring approach where families are actually listened to. They said that social services should: “support the whole family as a unit”; “help parents”; “support families and only remove children as a last resort”; “keep us with our family”. Children's social care should be: “human”; “a caring system with purpose”; “listening to the child instead of ticking boxes”.

**“What I would love to see change is for social services to go back to their normal role, to ease pressure, to help the family. [...] A social worker is supposed to ease the pressure of the family, bring hope to the family and find a way. They are also the voice of the family in front of the authority.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Lareine M.*

**“When social services get involved, they should ask young people and children who the important people in their life are and then work to support those relationships.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**7. Empowering children:** Children are often unable to have a voice without support due to their age. If we do not empower them they will be ignored. Children should be empowered to advocate for themselves and should actively be supported to have control over their lives.

**“We could make spaces so much more accessible for children to advocate for themselves, and then take them seriously and not say, ‘what you're saying has less value because of your age’.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Gill Main.*

Professionals should: “listen to children”; “keep children involved in all their care plans”; “inspire and empower children, and look at them as complete individuals with their individual needs.”

**They need: “to be given enough time and ways of communicating that I could have said what I needed.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

**“Kids, even if they don't know everything about human rights, they know what they should be in and what their rights are as such.”**

*Expert-by-experience, Anonymous*

## Lived-experience-informed recommendations

To improve outcomes for families and to ensure that Article 10 of ICESCR is recognised, we need children's social care to become a more supportive service that families are confident is there to help, rather than to judge and punish them. Based on our research, we recommend:

- That policies specifically aimed at preventing povertyism within children's social care be co-designed with children, young people and their families.
  - This should include teaching professionals that **poverty is not neglect**, which will help them to develop an understanding that families in poverty deserve support rather than separation. This training for social work professionals should be co-created and run by those with lived experience of poverty who can provide insight about the realities of how poverty impacts family life. This will help professionals to distinguish indicators of poverty from indicators of neglect. One model for this is provided by ATD Fourth World.<sup>27</sup>
  - When the UK enacts the socio-economic duty in section 1 of the 2010 Equalities Act<sup>28</sup>, its statutory guidance should also be co-designed to ensure that all policies, procedures and practices take into account and act on the impacts of poverty and povertyism in children's social care.
- To address the **impact on identity of closed contested adoptions**, kinship care is the more compassionate and advantageous way forward. We recommend that kinship care should be preferred to adoptions when it is safe and appropriate. We also recommend that the approach of looking for ways to support families be taken whenever possible, leaving separation of a child from their family as a last resort.
- To address the **emotional harm and erosion of emotional trust** caused by children's social care:
  - **increase the accountability** of professionals and alternative care providers. Professionals and alternative care providers must be held accountable with clear processes that allow children, young people, and families to take action if professionals and alternative carers are mistreating or misleading them and if they are excluding them and ignoring their input.
  - Include information surrounding the **context of families in all children's social care documentation** in order to inform decision-making and accurately reflect and humanise the family.
  - Change the **role of children's social care** to support and empower families rather than punish them.
  - Empower children so they can **advocate** for themselves and have control over their lives. It is important to support and promote community-based resources through family support services (including youth services) and housing support services.

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