

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

Submission to the List of Issues

End Child Poverty Coalition
&
Youth Voices (a project of ATD Fourth World and Teen Advocacy)

About us

1. **The End Child Poverty Coalition** <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/> is made up of around 70 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. In individual ways, all of these organisations are dedicated to the cause of alleviating child poverty.
2. **Youth Voices** is a project of ATD Fourth World <https://atd-uk.org/> and Teen Advocacy <https://teenadvocacy2020.wordpress.com/>. ATD 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. Teen Advocacy empowers adolescents and protects their rights through peer-to-peer support and by raising awareness of issues that impact them. Our vision is a world where children's views are valued and respected by all adults and where teens get a say about their lives and the world they live in.
3. The research for this submission was led by:
 - Kaydence Drayak and Tiegan Boyens, [Youth Ambassadors](#) for the End Child Poverty Coalition
 - Aurelia Drayak, a co-founder of Teen Advocacy
 - and Francesca Crozier-Roche, a youth worker and a member of ATD Fourth World

It was supported by Diana Skelton and Eva Carrillo Roas of ATD Fourth World; Lyle Barker of the University of Essex Human Rights Centre; and Dr. Gill Main who researches child poverty and social exclusion, with a particular emphasis on including the perspectives of children and families with expertise by experience in how we conceptualise, define and measure child poverty. Dr. Main grew up in poverty and experienced multiple child protection interventions as a child. The research for this submission was funded by ATD Fourth World.

Background about our human rights work

4. Our Youth Voices project started in 2021 when we came together to gather [evidence for the Committee on the Rights of the Child](#) about "the alternative care of the child". We spoke to 26 children and young people who had been removed from their family homes by social services and placed in children's social care or adopted. They told us:

"Sometimes it feels like adults don't get children's rights."

"For some of us, alternative care was where we were abused – not home with our families."

5. Children's social care is meant to protect children — but the children and young people we spoke to experienced failures in protection while in care, ranging from serious abuse to bullying from peers and stigmatisation by teachers and social workers. These kinds of harm are often invisible or ignored — but they can do just as much damage as the abuse that alternative care is meant to protect children from. Trying to “protect” children without listening to them is a recipe for disaster. About our collaboration in 2021, Kaydence, age 18, says: *"Quite a few of the organisations that Aurelia and I contacted — who say they work with or represent young people — did not get involved or empower young people to contribute to our report. Time and again we heard, 'We are too busy'. Young people and their families need to not be held back from having a say because the people getting paid to work with them are 'too busy'. We don't get paid and our whole life is on the line.... Don't sit cosy in your office, getting money to say, 'Too busy.'"*
6. Tiegan, age 20, points out: *"The lens of human rights and poverty can be a catalyst for wider issues. I was adopted at the age of four after two years in foster care. The reasons I ended up there are very complex with no one answer. However one thing is clear: Poverty was a reason. This is why I found this opportunity so interesting to actually view my life story as an adoptee through the lens of human rights and poverty, as it can be preventable or manageable. We need to discuss a topic that never really gets discussed in my experience."*

ICESCR and the impact of poverty on the right to protection for our families

7. To make this submission about the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), we got training in safeguarding and research ethics in order to offer peer facilitation for focus groups where we consulted other teenagers and young people whose lives have been impacted by poverty and by social service interventions in England and Scotland. The ICESCR articles that we are most deeply concerned about are:
 - a) Article 10(1), which declares that “the widest possible **protection and assistance should be accorded to the family**, which is the natural and fundamental group unit of society, particularly for its establishment and while it is responsible for the care and education of dependent children”.
 - 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”.
 - c) The right to protection and assistance to the family is connected with the **right to an adequate standard of living** (Article 11), which includes housing and food.
 - d) Article 2(2), which says that the right to protection and assistance to the family must be secured for everyone with **no discrimination of any kind**.
8. We want to bring to the attention of the CESCR that families in poverty in the UK can be subjected by children’s social care to harsh interventions that are discriminatory and driven by a concept of risk-aversion that is inconsistent and fails to consider the harm done by removing children into State care or contested closed adoptions. This harm includes the current insufficient regulations for the accommodation of 16 to 18-year-olds in care, which makes them vulnerable to grooming and trafficking. There are more details about these issues in the submissions to CESCR PSWG from ATD

Fourth World and [Human Rights Local](#) and from the Growing Rights Instead of Poverty Partnership ([GRIPP](#)). In our submission we will focus on sharing what children and young people have told us about how they are impacted by these violations of their rights. The quotations below come from focus groups and interviews that we carried out in November and December 2022 in Scotland and England, as well as from our 2021 work for the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Proposed questions

9. The 43-page report of the UK Government to the CESCR for the 7th review: does not mention Article 10; speaks only in passing of adoption and foster care; has no specific section on children's social care; and mentions children's services only in one paragraph in relation to the Isle of Man.ⁱ We therefore respectfully urge the CESCR to ask these questions about the right to protection and assistance to the family in the List of Issues.
- a) What measures are being taken to ensure that accommodation for 16 to 18-year-olds is appropriate?
 - b) Why are most children's homes in England operated by for-profit companies? What measures is the Government going to take to address the quality gap between care homes run for profit and those run by charities and local authorities?
 - c) Will the UK revise the Equality Act 2010 to ensure the prohibition of povertyism¹?
 - d) How do children's social services ensure consistency in the assessment of possible future neglect or emotional harm to children? How do these assessments include the emotional harm involved in carrying out investigations that disproportionately affect families in poverty and deprived areas and in removing children from their parents?
 - e) What impact assessment has the Government carried out to ensure that cuts to family support services (including youth services), community-based resources and housing support services do not affect disproportionately families in poverty?
 - f) Why are contested closed adoptions so common in the UK? When safe and appropriate, why not more often use kinship care to protect children's well-being without permanently severing their ties with their entire extended families and communities?

What measures are being taken to ensure that accommodation for 16 to 18-year-olds is appropriate?

10. Department for Education data published in July 2022 shows that there were 5,980 children in care aged 16 and 17 living in unregulated, non-care settings on 31 March 2021.ⁱⁱ Until September 2021, there were no regulations for the accommodation of 16 to 18-year-olds,ⁱⁱⁱ which has often put them in situations where they are vulnerable to being groomed and trafficked. Sir James Munby, the retired president of the Family Division of the High Court of England and Wales, does not think that the new regulation for supported accommodation will help: "There is the scarcity of suitable housing accommodation available for young people in care [...]. In relation to this, we need look no further than the judgment of His Honour Judge Dancey [...] [2019] EWFC 62,^{iv} a shocking case accurately epitomised by a journalist as the grim story of a child passed around the local authority care system like a bag of potatoes, ending up in a caravan park. [...In] the considered conclusions of this very

¹ "Povertyism", meaning discrimination on the ground of socio-economic disadvantage, is a term used by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights in his report: "Banning discrimination on grounds of socioeconomic disadvantage: an essential tool in the fight against poverty", (2022) UN Doc A/77/157 paras 4, 46.

experienced judge: '[...]There are growing concerns around child sexual exploitation, County Lines² and other forms of criminal exploitation as risks for these young people'.[...] Thus far the response of Government has been to propose banning the use of unregulated accommodation. But how is that going to help, when the fundamental problem is the absence of suitably regulated accommodation?''

11. A participant in one of our focus groups^{vi} explained what this was like for her in Leeds: *"When I was 16, my first placement when I left care was in a shared house with one girl that was in her 20s and a girl that was about 18. Both girls were actually using the place to have — I'll say 'clients' — come in, and that was my first house. One of the girls stole from me. I reacted and kicked off her door to get back my belongings. Guess who's getting in trouble — me, so I got moved. They then put me in a high-rise flat by myself in an area that was cordoned off as like the safe zone for the red-light district so it can be monitored. I lived on the fifth floor and the lift quite regularly was covered in toilet and alcohol all over the floor, and God knows what else on the walls. I used to have to go up the stairs and there would be working girls doing their business on the stairs, and drug users injecting and smoking. There was a bail hostel as well for people on the sex offenders register, literally over the road from where I was living, and then there was lots and lots of single men in the area. A lot of them were migrants, not that there's a problem with that, but there are obviously language barriers and cultural barriers. That was where I had to live for three years. I got a guy who punched me in the face, so then I got a dog to protect myself. But when the council found out I had a dog, they evicted me. That was my first four years leaving care.*

12. Another woman we interviewed for this submission^{vii} explained her experience in Derbyshire: "Children's Services placed me in adult accommodation when I was 15. They didn't explain anything to me or my family. They just removed me and housed me with seven grown adult men over the age of 18. I was abused by all of them. I was groomed and sexually trafficked in that accommodation. I ended up in the hands of a gang and was trafficked up and down from England to Scotland for sex. The social worker used to come out once a week to sign for my rent because I wasn't old enough to live there. She didn't check in, nothing. She used to take me to LIDL and buy my shopping and leave me. She didn't ask me what was going on there, or anything about my pregnancy at age 17.

13. "I wasn't even 'in care'. They didn't give a shit. I don't understand that you can put a 15-year-old girl with men and not expect the men to sleep with that girl. Social services might not have been the ones that was trafficking me up and down the country, but they were the ones responsible for that care. Every time I was admitted in hospital with broken bones, no one helped me. Every time, I was just discharged straight back to my abuser. As soon as I turned 16, I didn't see a social worker again. They didn't care. I was already in the hands of men.

14. "It's very sketchy, the supervision of accommodation. Because they call it 'independent living', it's almost like when you're in that bracket of 16 to 18, you can't be placed on a care order, because you're about to be turning 18. So it's this grey area of: 'Somebody has to be responsible, but there's no time to put them on the order because by that time they'll be 18. We'll just throw them in this accommodation, wait till they're 18 and then move them on'. The law was changed to accept that children are minors until they're 18.^{viii} But society didn't change with that law and today teenage

2 "County lines' is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK.... They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons." Home Office, 'County Lines Programme Overview' (GOV.UK, 2022) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/county-lines-programme/county-lines-programme-overview>>

girls are still being housed without supervision on barges and canal boats and on caravan estates. They're living with adults, and how do we expect exploitation to not go on? The world's going backwards. Nothing has gotten better over decades and centuries. We literally are going back in time.

15. "I've got great impacts of that. I believe that I was trafficked by Children's Services, so now as a mother I've pretty much avoided social services at any cost. I would literally have sold my body rather than asking for help from services just because of the fear of them intervening and the way they intervene. I wasn't parented, I was trafficked through a system. Abuse has been my norm. I just thought that was normal. Because of that, I ended up in a very severe domestic violence relationship and in addiction. However I didn't understand what domestic violence was. I didn't understand what addiction was. And then when I became a mother, social services expected me to understand that language of domestic violence and addiction, even though no one had parented me, and they were the ones who had trafficked me.
16. "But I did have the capacity to change because, since then, I literally transformed my whole life. I have dedicated my whole life to not just saving my own children from the system, but helping other families to save their children as well. I had the capacity to understand all that stuff and to change. Had they ever invested in me back then, things could have been different for me. I've walked this journey alone, and to be honest I'm absolutely tired. My soul is drained.
17. "After years of constant systematic abuse, I haven't been allowed to be a person. I haven't lived. I exist on a daily basis, and I've lived like that my whole life. All of that trauma is catching up with me. I don't know how they expect mental health to not be a problem. Why don't they expect suicide to be a problem? I don't understand how they expect productive members of society when they're allowing decades of abuse to happen in people's lives."

18. In an interview with a youth worker in the West Midlands, we heard about a situation happening now:^{ix} "A 17-year-old boy was placed in adult accommodation at first. They were going to leave him there but at the first meeting, I raised it as a concern that he was placed in adult accommodation. So they changed his social worker and then he was moved into supervised accommodation — but he's still living with over 18-year-olds. He's allowed to do whatever he wants with no boundaries. He can get involved in County lines. They're supposed to be helping him build independent living. But I believe that he's been coerced by Children's Services. He's got autism, ADHD, and he also has emotional needs because of the impact of him having been in care as a child. And now they manipulate him with money by giving him vouchers. They allowed this boy to sign a section 20 on his own behalf without any advocate present.³ They don't let him have any family contact; but after six months of no contact with the boy's mother, they contacted her to say that actually they can't cope with him. They don't know a way forward. They asked: is there any way she can help social services out now with where he's at? It's disgraceful."

³ Section 20 refers to a passage within [The Children Act 1989](#). It details how a child should be taken care of by the local authority in the event of abandonment or the parents becoming unable to care for the child. (<https://hatchbrenner.co.uk/services/child-law-solicitors/section-20-agreements>)

**Why are most children's homes in England operated by for-profit companies?
What measures will Government take to address the quality gap between care homes
run for profit and those run by charities and local authorities?**

19. The main objective of a children's home is providing children with a safe and stable place to live where they are "cared for"^x by an adult. However, the government does not house and care for all minors equally. Unregulated accommodations for 16 to 18-year-olds have long been widespread. In 2019, BBC Newsnight stated that "every night in England 6,000 kids in care are living in one [...and being exposed] to violence and crime".^{xi} Despite the 2021 change in law that now requires "supported" accommodation for 16 to 18-year-olds, that standard remains lower than the one for children under 16.
20. This lack of care for the welfare of teenagers also extends to child asylum seekers. The Guardian reported in October 2022: "The revelation that 222 children have gone missing from hotels in which they were placed under a scheme for unaccompanied young asylum seekers should shame the government and, above all, the Home Office. The risks to young people who are invisible to the authorities are well-known, and include exploitation by criminal gangs."^{xii}
21. "Article 39" is an independent charity that fights for the rights of children living in state and privately-run institutions in England, and named for Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In December 2022, Article 39 wrote: "16 and 17 year-olds should have been included in the secondary legislation and protected from the known dangers of placement in unregulated accommodation. When the legal change was announced, the then Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said he could not imagine a circumstance where a child in care under the age of 16 should be placed in a setting without care that was focused on independence. Having got to the end of the litigation, we are no further forward in understanding why the Minister was seemingly able to imagine 16 and 17 year-olds going without care."^{xiii}
22. The accommodations being challenged by Article 39 are mostly run by private landlords whose main objective is clearly not the best interests of the child, but profit. As explained in this article by the Guardian: "The majority of providers are privately owned, and the average cost of an unregulated place is £948 a week, with average operating profits of £330 a week, according to the Competition and Markets Authority."^{xiv} These profits can skyrocket to surprising figures. One example is shown in a mini-documentary series by BBC Newsnight about unregistered accommodations: "It seems the kind of high-risk children that Klaudia lived with attracted premium payments for the company that ran the home, now called Harvest Care Group. Her council, Luton Borough, stopped using it in 2017 but many London boroughs kept the residents and the money flowing in for Harvest Care Group owner Craig Cameron. His company received more than four and a half million pounds in fees between 2015 and 2019, according to figures obtained by the open contracting partnership, and the spend network for Newsnight. Invoices seen by Newsnight indicate that Mr Cameron sometimes

charged fees of more than £20,000 a month per resident.”^{xv}

23. We can further see these astonishing profits in a 6-bedroom unregulated house where: “Paige’s council, Walsall, paid £2,000 a month to keep her there. Echo’s council, Merton, paid £3,600 a month. They shared the house with a 16-year-old from Cumbria, and that council paid nearly £16,000 a month. Also inside, a 15-year-old from Hampshire, housed at a cost we believe to her local council of £18,000 a month. In the extension, there was a 15-year-old from London. The place charged his council around £22,000 a month. And the highest charge was for a child who appears to have cost Bromley council more than £28,000 a month. The number of children in the house at any one time varied, but our research suggests that in a good month, they would earn £72,520 in fees for just six children.”^{xvi}

Will the UK revise the Equality Act 2010 to ensure the prohibition of povertyism⁴?

24. Growing up in poverty means different things to different people, but discrimination and povertyism are constant features. Here is what participants in our focus groups^{xvii} said:

25. *“It came to a point where my mum got herself into lots of debt and very difficult situations. So we moved over 20 times. We kept getting kicked out every couple of months. No one would take us, so we were illegally kind of renting this garage that was somewhat converted, underneath the train bridge. There were lots of drug dealings happening every day right outside the door of the garage, so it wasn't exactly the best area. That massively affected my school attendance, my whole educational experience. It caused me to get excluded from school. I went to a pupil referral unit for alternative provision. I definitely felt like even eating three meals a day or turning the heating on was a luxury rather than a necessity.”*

26. *“Poverty takes away the basics. I'm fed up of fighting to live and just to survive. And poverty just means that that's all you can do. You can only exist.”*

27. *“For me, being a child in poverty gave me a sense of always being in the spotlight. Everyone knows stuff about you: your school, and other families too. And not in a kind of positive celebrity way — you just feel constantly judged and in the spotlight, but without having chosen to be in the spotlight. There's different rules for you and your family. You're judged in terms of what you buy. I grew up in a very small community so everyone knew we were a single parent family with my mother on benefits. In the supermarket, you get judged if you get something that isn't deemed humble enough for your situation. Parents don't want their kids to be bullied, so they're buying the more expensive thing, but then they're being slighted for getting their kids the trainers they need. You can't win.”*

28. *“Poverty is a block to everybody being able to access equal opportunities and to feel like you can fit in with your peers. Parents think that children don't pick up on poverty, and think they're hiding it, but actually kids pick up way more than people give them credit for, and then that preys on mental health.”*

29. *“Poverty hinders young people being able to plan for their futures. I didn't go to university because as a*

4 “Povertyism”, meaning discrimination on the ground of socio-economic disadvantage, is a term used by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights in his report: ‘Banning discrimination on grounds of socioeconomic disadvantage: an essential tool in the fight against poverty’ (2022) UN Doc A/77/157 paras 4, 46.

care leaver, my biggest fear was that I wouldn't fit in. I didn't belong there. It was full of well-off people that came from good families and how could I possibly fit into that kind of arena? I just didn't have that support or confidence to put myself forward because of what I came from."

30. *"Poverty is not just about not having your needs met but also all the experiences and things that add up to a full life. Being able to go out and socialise with your friends or family is a huge part of your mental health."*
31. *"When I was a child growing up in poverty there was a strong internal feeling of shame — being shamed in relationships with other people. Like being on free school meals and being shamed by other young people who could see I had my lunch tickets. Or being shamed when I went along to appointments at job centres to pick up my mother's allowances and so on. Shame is the unifying thing in all of that. You want to fit in or do what you enjoy doing; but because of not being able to do that it creates that feeling of shame and injustice."*

How do children's social services include the emotional harm involved in carrying out investigations that disproportionately affect families in poverty and deprived areas?

32. Investigations by children's social care are often experienced as harsh and disempowering. Some 75% of the young people in our focus groups felt that they were not given enough information by social services about the interventions being carried out. In our focus groups^{xviii}, they said:
33. *"For the child, it doesn't matter how bad their home is, that's still their home. It's a safe space. And so if you walk in and go, 'this is bad space', a child's just going to go 'but why?' Social service is sometimes a bit heavy footed. They just walk in asking questions, expecting that you'll answer honestly to a stranger and not taking any time to make things feel safe or to explain what might happen."*
34. *"Every time a social worker came to our home, later my mum would be on the phone to one of the other mums in the area, both screaming and shouting about how terrible they are. I was born into social work intervention. My older brothers had social workers due to school attendance. As a baby, you're born and put onto a caseload. I really didn't like any of my social workers. I didn't feel like they understood our cultural context or our financial context. I remember as a child seeing their clothes and the cars they drive. They were really fancy. And I didn't know why these rich people were coming to our house and telling us what to do, or telling my parents what to do. My parents were obviously struggling in poverty. But the social workers were blaming and individualising my parents, saying: 'You're doing something wrong; you're failing'; rather than, 'You're in a very difficult situation and maybe we can signpost you or provide support'. It was like: 'If the children aren't eating, it's the parents fault; they're neglecting the children.'"*
35. Many children say that social service investigations erode their sense of trust in people in a role of authority. *"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."*

36. *"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. I've tried to sort of go to my brain and be like, 'Stop being ridiculous, it's fine'. But it doesn't seem to work. 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."*
37. *"Doctors referred our family to social services. And so in my head that means I just I can't trust them, which is really not great because now I won't go to the doctor of my own choice. And no doctor ever explained what happened. I was only explained really anything by my own family. Doctors just act as if it never happened, which makes it even more stressful."*
38. *"A child will understand everything. But for some reason if you're under 9 apparently social workers think you don't understand. They underestimate. A 3-year-old is sat there going 'I know something's going on. And I can tell it's big, but you're not telling me anything'. My dad remembers social workers walking in and out of our house all the time when I was 2. Almost every time, I would refuse to speak. I am just like that, I can go willy nilly on people. But they were like: 'Oh, you might be abusing her because she's not speaking to us no matter what we try'. And my dad was like: 'It's cause you don't explain anything to her and you're a complete stranger who just walked into our house. What do you want from a 2-year-old?'"*
39. *"In my family, there were bad things that led to social service interventions, but the way social workers intervened made a difficult situation into a catastrophic one. They just did so much damage that now I've been estranged from almost all of my family since I was 18. Now I'm really pleased that I'm able to have some small amount of contact with my sister who's 18 months older than me. But she's autistic, and it presents in a way that makes it very difficult for her to have conversations with people. In addition to that, there was the trauma of all of that intervention for a long time. She just couldn't have contact with anyone. It all stemmed from the way social services intervened. When everyone's terrified, no one can be open with each other, and you can't fix anything when people feel like that."*
40. *"I grew up feeling worthless and feeling I wasn't good enough to keep my family together. I wasn't good enough to get them out of the situation that we're in. That was as a teenager. Then as I became a young adult, that kind of just set into stone. The systems we were involved with ruined my self worth. Even now I find it hard to get into relationships or trust people because I always think there's a hidden agenda or they're going to tell me that they're going to do stuff for me and that they care. And then they're going to let me down because that's just been the pattern. I don't trust systems whatsoever."*
41. *"I've had experience of social workers that are just tick-box exercising — that's how it came across to me. They just made decisions and would inform other people of things about me but never with context. So when I've gone back to read my files, I remember how certain situations happened, but the social worker just put one or two lines. Like: 'She kicked off with the teachers at school today'. But there was nothing in there that said: actually, the teacher made a comment about the fact that I wasn't living at home with my parents and if I didn't start improving, I'd end up the same way. So that's why I flipped out, because no one in the class knew I was in care until she said that! So I flipped out and then got suspended from school. I got the bad reputation. But the social worker didn't put the context. I'm not saying I was right. But the context could have said that there was a comment that made me feel triggered, and that's why I reacted. I was kind of being punished, like I was the parent that we were all taken away from, when in fact I was the kid that tried to keep the family together for years."*

42. A woman in Northeast England^{xxx} said: "Social workers set my family up to fail from when my mum first asked for support. When I was a little girl all they ever did was take me away from my mum for a short time and then send me back without actually working with my mum to fix her initial addiction. Bear in mind, my mum was also in care because her mum died when she was 9. So we're in a trauma generational cycle in my family. They never worked with Mum. Nothing was ever dealt with from her childhood. That trauma was passed on to me. So I was born in and out of care from the age of six months up until 7 years. Then when I was 13, it was me that made the initial call because I couldn't mentally or physically manage to keep the other kids safe while my mum was using [drugs] and my stepdad had been locked in jail. It became too much for me and I just couldn't cope. So I phoned and asked for help.
43. "Social services basically told my mum: 'If you sign the children over to social services, we've got a place in a rehab for you that does long term work for addicts'. They said they had funding for her, so she signed us over thinking she was finally going to get that help. But within three days they turned around and told her they didn't actually have the funding. So then my mum was in that much more of a bad way, where she couldn't bring herself to tell the younger children that we weren't coming home. Social services said they couldn't do it either. So guess who it fell on? I had to go to my brother and sister's primary school and tell them that they weren't coming home. Now my sister hated that because, like any kid, you just want to be the same as everyone else. You want your mum and dad. The day I had to tell her — that took our relationship apart. She thought maybe I had not helped Mum get better. She was 8 at the time. When she was 21, we finally had a conversation about it, and I understood her point of view and she understood mine; but none of the professionals ever helped that situation. And they made it really difficult for me to see my siblings; but then they made out to my siblings that I just didn't care.
44. "When I left care, I did everything in my power to get them out and have them with me. When I was 24, one of them was allowed to — but it was only because they couldn't find a foster carer. I think it was more about the money. It was cheaper for me to be a kinship carer than it was to find her another placement. Eventually they decided to offer me my brother too, but it took 11 years of me fighting before they listened to me. From then on, his whole file changed from how they were describing him as a young person in the care system before. After coming to me, he flourished, he came out of himself. He was able to have his own sense of style, which his foster carers had taken away from him. Social services have caused a lot of trauma. They've broken a lot of our relationships and they failed my mum until the end. My mum passed away in July — and when she died, somehow that became my responsibility. They said: 'We took you away from her because she wasn't good enough to look after you. Now however, you can pay for her funeral, even though you're a single parent on a low income, and we're not going to give you any support whatsoever'. That's the situation social services have left me and my family in. It all relies on funding. If it's not a humanistic approach, it's not going to help people."

45. Some children say it's in foster care that they were abused. One focus group participant was 10 when she was put in care with her 3-year-old brother: *"At home, we weren't being physically abused by my parents. We were just being neglected. Social services said they found us a placement. So the first night there, at one o'clock in the morning, my little brother came and got in the end of my bed to go to sleep. That was always his routine at home too. But in the foster home the next day, me and my brother were basically stood in the living room together with all the other foster kids around us while the carers told us*

we were doing wrong for sharing the bed. I was trying to explain to the carer he believes I'm his mum, so he comes to me. She wasn't having none of it. Then she specifically told me if I didn't like it there to pack my bags and leave, because there's a queue of other kids at the door who would take my bed. She basically told me that she's in it for the money. My brother got upset and came to me for comfort. But because they were trying to get him out of this role of coming to me all the time instead of going to them instead, they punished him for coming to me for a hug. And then he got angry and kind of poured some of his gravy onto the remote control. So they grabbed him by his arm, put him in the garden. They got the pan of gravy — luckily it wasn't boiling, but still — and they basically tipped it over my brother, then left him in the garden as punishment to humiliate him, and then hosed him down with a hose pipe like he was an animal, and sent him upstairs. And then when he came down, because he cried, they allowed their son to hit my brother. He had a red mark on his face. So I kicked off. I left the premises and refused to go back. I slept the night on social service's doorstep because I didn't want to go back there. But they made me go back. It became evident that I had to do something pretty drastic to get moved. So I stole someone's mobile phone and purposely got caught. I messed it up for myself and basically I was separated from my brother. The one thing I wanted was for the foster carers to be investigated afterwards. They had to retrain, so my voice was heard eventually, but it took for me to kick off before anyone listened. They were actually hurting my brother.”

46. An 18-year-old girl in Scotland^{xx} said: “When I was 14, social workers insisted on speaking to us repeatedly, but they never really listened. My younger siblings were terrified. We were all unanimously and consistently saying we didn't want to be taken away from our parents. But your voice doesn't matter. It's more like they were trying to trick us. They'd try to imply that our parents were dangerous, or that we needed to be like heroes and rat on them or something. None of it was actually telling us anything true or helpful. They actually were like cartoon villains in our minds. If you don't give the right answer, they ignore it. I remember two strangers came to my friend's house and drove me to a location unknown by me, and I was just stuck alone with these two strangers. They didn't talk to me. They talked to each other about how they wanted to go get lunch and things like that. They ignored me. Then they interviewed me for like three hours and none of the answers could be used in defence of my parents. They could only have been used if I said anything against them. They didn't ask if I wanted an advocate there.
47. “When they interviewed my younger siblings, I wasn't allowed to go in and help support them. They were just all by themselves. It made them incredibly anxious and really scared. Because social workers had taken one of my younger sisters into care already, I remember how scared they were to go to school. These were the people that took our sister away. I eventually found out that social workers were coming to the school trying to interview my sisters and brothers who were scared that they were going to be taken away too and never see us again. Social workers weren't meant to be doing this. We found out later because there was a concern about my siblings' attendance at school. The social workers said it wasn't very good; but my mother was quite confused because we'd all been attending school every single day. Then the head teacher told us that the receptionist had been telling social workers our siblings weren't there because they saw how terrified they were, saying 'please, don't let them speak to us'. So school just became this really scary place that I may never come back from. It makes it really hard to trust people after you go through that. It makes it feel like you can't ask for help, because the social workers are meant to be there to help you, right? They're meant to try and make it better. So you can't trust people coming in to help you. I have no intention of asking for help anytime soon.”

**Why are contested closed adoptions so common in the UK?
Permanently severing their ties with their entire extended families and communities
has a negative impact on children's sense of their own identity.**

48. Contested closed adoptions are a major concern for a large number of families in the UK, and that has been the case for a long time.^{xxi} We are concerned that the focus on closed adoption in the UK is carried out with a rush to permanence that severs children from their birth families in ways that damage their identity. The children and young people we spoke to understand that removals from their family may sometimes be necessary — but in their experience, such removals as currently happen rob them of their right to personal identity, family relationships, and participation. Their vision of high quality children's care is care in which they are treated as individuals, and given choices. Blanket policies are harmful, whether about: separating siblings or keeping them together; contact with biological family members; the information about themselves that they are allowed to access, and the timing of this information. Quality care should be focused on individual needs and preferences, not dictated by one-size-fits-all policies administered by overworked social workers. In the consultations we carried out in 2021^{xxii} for the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, children told us:
49. *"It wasn't like I had bad carers, but it was just like, about the word identity; it was hard to kind of find who I was." "Family life gives us access to our identity — being in care can rob us of that." "Growing up in care, it was difficult to develop a sense of who we are because we needed to please so many people, and different people wanted different things from us." "You're trying to make everyone happy at the same time, but then it's like you're not being yourself; but if I am myself, you won't be happy. Then I've got to deal with all this, so it's much easier if I just be this way with you, be this way with you, be this way with you, then everyone's happy." "Personality switching: biggest thing I've learned. So while I was in the home, I was not that talkative. Then when I was in my family, I was really goofy. Then when I was out, I'm really polite. When I'm around friends, I can switch to how they are. Then when my carer found out I did that, she's like, 'that's a bit weird, you shouldn't do that'. And in my mind, I'm doing this because you forced me to do it, because you didn't help me."*
50. *"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."*
51. *"They have the decency to tell you one thing — but then they don't tell you that you've got five other siblings, one who's like, 10 years older than you and the others are like 10 years younger. They're just very selective on what they tell you."*
52. *"Not having enough information about ourselves and our stories can make it difficult to know who we are — but getting new information can disrupt our sense of identity too. I feel they just try and shelter you from a lot, but they don't actually realise, they're sheltering you from you at the end of the day. I've been trying to build myself up, based on what I know. And then out of nowhere, when you feel like a person's old enough, then you want to say, well actually, this, this, this, this and that happened. Then it's a bit like:*

well, the person who I was, that's not me then, because now you're telling me all of this, I'm a different person." "I've found out things that if I could have had known sooner rather than later, I would have changed. So it's one of those things where they need to be thorough when they're going to tell you something: of course drip feed it, but don't miss things out that could potentially be important." "Social workers should also think carefully about what they tell us and when. The opinion I have is if an authority tells you: 'no, that's something you don't need to know at a certain age', then just leave it because you're only setting yourself up to get hurt, which is what I guess in a way I was ready for — but I wasn't because I only found out about all this crap last year. And I had just turned 20. I found all this out on my 20th birthday, near enough. I'd rather have been told, sooner rather than later than having to deal with it now."

53. One young woman in Yorkshire^{xxiii} said: "I was adopted and I've done some adoption panels. But I don't think I've seen anyone saying, 'We've tried to ask the child what do you want? Would you like to stay in contact with your birth family? Why? What sort of home would you like?' Those are good questions to ask.
54. "My experience was negative at first. If a child gets taken off their parents, the child has just been ripped from the only thing we know. Even if social services are just coming around to investigate or have a nosy and all that, there still is a very negative effect for a child witnessing this. Social services had offered drug rehab for my dad and said, 'We'll take child off you for a couple of weeks, but this is our promise that the child will come back to your care'. He'd already been in rehab three months when I got taken off him, you know, and apparently was doing well. It's literally written in my files that he was doing well. But then he stopped because I'd just got taken off him and he needed a way to cope. I respect that in some ways. He was like: 'What's the point if my child's not gonna return?' When social services are coming in with interventions, they should really try to make sure children and parents don't have to be separated, or if they do, they're not completely severed and can keep very good contact. In this country, with adoption every sort of legal connection with your family is severed. If a child dies, their birth family aren't entitled to know and vice versa. When I told my dad, 'if I'd died, you wouldn't have known', he ended up in tears. He was just the saddest person alive because it'd been his biggest fear: if something had happened to me, how would he ever know? It's the natural parent's instinct.
55. "My dad's parents weren't involved when social services investigated us, but it was still negatively impacting their well being. They were like: 'What's going on? This is worrying for our grandchild'. It's a lifelong impact. Both of my birth parents lost me, which is a massive deal for them. And I was also negatively impacted. There's positives because I went to a good place. I had the right support, and that was so vital. But for my family members, there were a lot of negatives and not all negatives were recovered from. For my dad's dad, the social interventions we had were worse than going to war. He was almost already teetering a bit, being able to just keep stable, and I think he just rocketed as soon as I was taken off because I was his only grandchild. And he'd always been a family man. He'd always done everything for the family. Finally to have a grandchild was like, 'Oh, wonderful', but then that was slowly taken away. For the first five months of my life I was away from him because I was in a baby-mother unit. When he finally got me back again, it was like 'yay!', but next I was taken off them. For my whole family, that caused a lot of stress. They didn't get support."

What impact assessment has the Government carried out to ensure that cuts to family support services (including youth services), community-based resources and housing support services do not affect disproportionately families in poverty?

56. Families need to be offered appropriate support and access to services to ensure an adequate standard of living and to prevent and end child poverty. Since the 2010s, austerity has weakened the UK's social security system to a point in which it cannot effectively support those that need support most in society. As a youth worker, Francesca Crozier-Roche regrets the closure of many community places: *"They provide spaces to find out your rights and to have open conversations in safe spaces. Austerity cuts have left communities absolutely without those connections to our fellow neighbours. It takes a village to raise a child, and young people deserve all those elements. It's not just about food, shelter and water. It's about community connections, and harbouring those conversations to explore policies, the law, and things that actually are going on. The removing of all of these spaces and places and budgets leaves us in circumstances where young people will Google search their worries rather than actually having a safe, open conversation. Google search engine is not very safe. Do we ever really gain clarity from that mass of 'information' on Google? Probably not; whereas conversations allow you to unpick values and ethics, and put them back together."*
57. Kaydence adds her perspective: *"I wasn't aware of how those austerity cuts impacted my family, but it makes sense that they would do. What's also a shame is that, after having social work intervention, I don't interact with youth services in the same way, because I no longer see them as safe spaces. They're just a space where you're being watched and monitored and someone's gonna go and tell on you if you see something you're not supposed to. Social work intervention has an impact on how these spaces could benefit you. I don't trust a community where there could be a social worker hiding among them, who will get me in trouble, or just somebody who thinks they're doing the right thing by reporting everything you say. Now I don't think I can ever trust people in government authority. I don't think that can be repaired. One of the things that makes that bit harder is all the safeguarding policies. I completely understand why they're in place, but they're very intrusive. I've started volunteering for an organisation. They told me that I need to tell social workers if the young people I'm working with seem dirty regularly or look dishevelled or things like that. These overly cautious safeguarding policies make it very hard to build trust. But I do think you can create community spaces that would be saved by removing people in authority that are from the government and being run by non-profit organisations. We need more spaces run by young people for other young people where you can build trust."*

Conclusion

58. In the view of Aurelia, age 17: *"I think we should stop separating families and start supporting them. I feel like the default is always: 'Something's not working so let's just split them all up'. That should be the most desperate last resort because nine times out of ten parents won't do wrong by their children. If something's not going right, usually it's because they need support, whether it's because they're disabled, they have mental health issues, or they don't have the financial capability. All those issues are easily fixed with some support."*
59. Tiegan adds: *"There needs to be more consideration of the poverty of resources to help these families that get their children taken off them. Where was the safe housing near support networks they already had? Where was the network for food? Where was the network to prevent risk that got them into a bad*

situation? Sometimes when women get themselves in trouble, it's because they have to use older guys or whatever else for a safe space. In terms of social services, we need more consideration of what poverty is, and of the lack of resources. A lot of the time problems come from mental unwellness or a family history of abuse or you're now sat here with a child of your own and going: 'So how do I cope with this child when I didn't even get parented myself?'"

60. Kaydence calls decisions about removing a child from their family *"life sentences that will do harm because taking them away from their families, even if that's necessary, is harmful. And it's not taken as seriously as I think it should be. It feels like that's just the default for what social workers want to do"*.
61. Dr. Gill Main adds: *"It's a default for some types of family as well. This links back to poverty, because if a family looks one particular way, I think that is a default. If a family looks another particular way — like a middle class family — I think the removal of their child is probably very unlikely to happen, however much harm is going on within that family. An important thing for people to know is that all of these policies and processes are not objective truths. They exist within structures, which are built on inequalities and unfairness. They're built to promote the benefit of some people and keep other people in their place."*
62. **We recommend** that kinship care should be preferred to closed adoptions when it is safe and appropriate, and that measures be created to prevent socio-economic discrimination by children's social care services. All children in care should be placed only in safely regulated and appropriate accommodation until the age of 18. It is important to support and promote community-based resources through family support services (including youth services) and housing support services. In our second report to ICESCR, later in 2023, the End Child Poverty Coalition and Youth Voices will include a section with our recommendations about how **listening to children's voices can make a positive difference in reforming children's social care**.

ANNEX I: Organisations that are part of the End Child Poverty Coalition

The End Child Poverty Coalition is a group of around 70 organisations, charities, trade unions and faith groups, that are all in individual ways dedicated to the cause of alleviating child poverty.

[4 in 10: London's Child Poverty Network](#)

[Action for Children](#)

[Aspire NI](#)

[ATD Fourth World](#)

[Barnardo's](#)

[British Association of Social Workers \(BASW\)](#)

[British Martial Arts & Boxing Association](#)

[Buttle UK](#)

[Child Poverty Action Group](#)

[Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland](#)

[Children in Wales](#)

[Children in Scotland](#)

[Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition](#)

[Church Action On Poverty](#)

[Close the Gap](#)

[Coram](#)

[Doorstep Library](#)

[End Fuel Poverty Coalition](#)

[End Furniture Poverty](#)

[Engender](#)

[The Equality Trust](#)

[Family Action](#)

[Family Fund](#)

[Fairness Foundation](#)

[Fire Brigades Union](#)

[Food Wise](#)

[Gingerbread](#)

[Home Start](#)

[British Humanist Association](#)

[Independent Food Aid Network](#)

[Just Fair](#)

[Learning Disability Wales](#)

[Level Trust](#)

[Leyf Nurseries](#)

[Magic Breakfast](#)

[NAWRA: National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers](#)

[National Children's Bureau](#)

[National Day Nurseries Association \(NDNA\)](#)

[National Development Team for Inclusion \(NDTI\)](#)

[National Education Union](#)

[NEA: National Energy Action](#)

[North East Child Poverty Commission](#)

[One Parent Families Scotland](#)

[OXFAM](#)

[Parenting Across Scotland](#)

[Royal College of Nursing](#)

[RCPCH: Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health](#)

[Royal College of Psychiatrists](#)

[Save the Children](#)

[SOSCN: Scottish Out of School Care Network](#)

[Step Change](#)

[TACT: The Adolescent and Children's Trust](#)

[The British Psychological Society](#)

[The Childhood Trust](#)

[The Children's Society](#)

[The Church of England](#)

[The Mighty Creatives](#)

[Moravian Church](#)

[National Youth Agency \(NYA\)](#)

[The Poverty Alliance](#)

[Thrive Teesside](#)

[The Trussell Trust](#)

[TUC: Trades Union Congress](#)

[Turn2Us](#)

[UNICEF](#)

[Unite the Union](#)

[USDAW: Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers](#)

[Wood Street Mission](#)

[Z2K \(Zacchaeus 2000 Trust\) Fighting Poverty](#)

- i UK Government, 'The United Kingdom's 7th periodic report under the United Nations Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)' (UK Government 2022) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-covenant-on-economic-social-and-cultural-rights-icescr-7th-periodic-report>>.
- ii UK Government, 'Looked after children aged 16 to 17 in independent or semi-independent placements' (*gov.uk*, 2022) <<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/looked-after-children-aged-16-to-17-in-independent-or-semi-independent-placements/2021#dataBlock-b56c1048-47a3-4114-02ee-08da60b29403-tables>>.
- iii <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/unregulated-accommodation-banned-for-vulnerable-children-under-16>
- iv Dorset Council v A (Residential Placement: Lack of Resources) [2019] EWFC Civ 62.
- v James Munby, Royal Holloway University of London Symposium, 16 March 2021, <https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/media/16720/wswd%20speech%20by%20sir%20james%20munby.pdf>
- vi Focus group carried out by Youth Voices on 12 December 2022.
- vii Interview carried out by ATD Fourth World on 26 November 2022.
- viii For information about the ages of majority in the UK, please see <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/blogs/cathy-glass/ages-majority>.
- ix Interview carried out by ATD Fourth World on 26 November 2022.
- x <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-open-a-childrens-home/introduction-to-childrens-homes>
- xi <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al3BKR52Gps>
- xii <https://amp.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/oct/24/the-guardian-view-on-222-lost-children-shame-on-the-home-office>
- xiii <https://article39.org.uk/2022/12/19/permission-refused-for-article-39-to-take-care-discrimination-challenge-to-court-of-appeal/>
- xiv <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/mar/17/government-lawful-in-allowing-16--and-17-year-olds-in-unregulated-care-court-rules>
- xv <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al3BKR52Gps>
- xvi <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB2x-bfrDxM>
- xvii Focus groups carried out by Youth Voices on 26 November, 2 December, and 13 December 2022.
- xviii Focus groups carried out by Youth Voices on 26 November, 2 December, and 13 December 2022.
- xix Focus group carried out by Youth Voices on 13 December 2022.
- xx Focus group carried out by Youth Voices on 26 November 2022.
- xxi Cherry Casey, 'The UK Has a Forced Adoption Problem - Prospect Magazine' (*prospectmagazine.co.uk*, 2022)
- xxii <https://atd-uk.org/2021/07/28/our-rights-our-say-children-and-young-people-speak-out/>
- xxiii Focus group carried out by Youth Voices on 26 November 2022.