

Submission #1

Who we are: This submission was prepared for ATD Fourth World in dialogue with Francesca Crozier-Roche and Dr. Gill Main. Ms. Crozier-Roche is a JNC Youth and Community Practitioner and an expert by experience in social care. Dr. Main is an Associate Professor at the University of Leeds 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 in the UK, in the 1980s and 1990s.

This submission is based on our reflections on meetings and conversations with 26 care-experienced children and young people, detailed in ATD Fourth World's other submissions, in addition to our own expertise by experience and through research and practice.

These are our summaries of the key points expressed by the children and young people we spoke to.

What is quality alternative care?

"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."

The children and young people we spoke to understood that alternative care may sometimes be necessary — but in their experience, such care as it currently happens robs them of their right to personal identity, family relationships, and participation. Their vision of high quality alternative 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; or the information about themselves that they are allowed to access, and the timing of this information. Quality alternative care should be focused on individual needs and preferences, not dictated by one-size-fits-all policies administered by overworked social workers.

Policies to promote keeping families together

"When my sister got taken into care, one of the issues they had against my mum was that she was sleeping on the sofa. They said, 'That's not a proper bed', but who's defining a sofa as not a proper bed?"

Anti-poverty policies should redistribute resources to the families most in need and should acknowledge parents and children as holistic human beings, rather than one-dimensional problems. Among key reasons they needed alternative care, children and

young people highlighted a lack of funding and resources for poverty reduction, mental health problems, and support for young parents. Existing policy and practice too easily perpetuate stereotypical narratives around people in poverty as bad parents; this harms families and means children are more likely to be removed from parents who would be excellent carers if they had the resources they needed.

Involving children and young people

"You were in the hot seat and everyone's staring at you, and everyone's going to read out everything about you. And it's the same thing all the time. It's not like now you're older, let's talk about something different. It's the same things I told you when I was 11 years old, when I was 15, it's the exact same, you asked me the same questions, it's not really going to change. It's the same generic questions that you asked everyone."

Children and young people found existing processes for their inclusion to be tokenistic at best and actively harmful at worst. They described meetings in which they felt ashamed and as if they were being punished. They felt humiliated by being taken out of class to attend these meetings, then having to explain this to peers, which sometimes resulted in bullying and exclusion. Meaningful inclusion means age- and individual-appropriate opportunities, not box ticking. It means ensuring that policies evolve in keeping with the growing capacities of the child. It means consulting with children and young people about what information they want and what they don't want — and finding ways to respect their wishes. It means balancing the harm that might be done by too much information with the harm that is done by not enough information. It means moving out of adult comfort zones to prioritise the comfort of children.

Support for care leavers

"Four weeks is all I got to find a job, make sure I've got everything. I walked in and my carer just went, 'You're leaving in four weeks'. I haven't even received a text from her to say, 'Are you okay? Do you need anything?' It's been 'bye', no more contact. No more nothing. That's why I'm afraid to text her."

The process of leaving care can be traumatic — especially if young people are not consulted. As with many decisions made in their lives, children and young people we spoke to felt that social workers did not always consult them, and decisions made on their behalf were wrong for them. Current UK policy allows 16-18 year olds in care to be placed in unregulated independent and semi-independent accommodations which are often highly inappropriate and unsafe. Unfair time limits are placed on support which are not experienced by young people with biological family support. Care-experienced young people need more, not less, support than other young people; and they need to be treated as individuals rather than with blanket policies and procedures. Young people often know what they want and need better than social workers do.

Support, guidance and processes for the future

Based on our experience as adults who have listened to young people, have personal experience of the child protection system, and have researched and worked with children, young people and families, we believe that a genuinely participatory and respectful process is needed. We believe that processes around listening to children and young people in and leaving care are, or have become, procedural rather than meaningful. They need a complete overhaul. Children and young people need individually tailored support which includes listening to and respecting their wishes. They understand that their preferences can't always be accommodated; but they need to be heard. If space were given for this, compromise would be possible between the judgment of social workers and the preferences of children and young people.

On a broader level, resources need to be invested in social security and appropriate services for families. Years of austerity have further reduced already inadequate incomes for families in deep poverty. Living in poverty creates shame and stigma, mental health problems, family stress and tensions, and lack of access to necessities. Children and families in poverty, especially those suffering from multiple disadvantages, are significantly more likely to be the subject of state intervention in the form of child protection investigations and care proceedings than those not living in poverty.¹ Children in the UK's most deprived communities are over 10 times more likely to enter the care system than those from the most affluent areas.² Social workers should be trained to identify and respond to poverty and mental health issues differently to how they respond to child abuse. It is also worryingly problematic that children whose parents were in care are more likely to be in care themselves. As stated in *The Case for Change*³: "Rates of intergenerational care demonstrate a long-term failure to break cycles of trauma." Investing resources to support families in poverty would help to break this vicious cycle.

Children's rights must be front and centre

"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."

Protection: The alternative care system is meant to support child protection — but the children and young people we spoke to experienced failures in protection while in alternative 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 —

1 Morris, K., Mason, W., Bywaters, P., Featherstone, B., Daniel, B., Brady, G., Bunting, L., Hooper, J., Mirza, N., Scourfield, J. and Webb, C. (2018) 'Social work, poverty, and child welfare interventions', *Child & Family Social Work*, 23(3), pp.364-372.

2 McNicoll, A., "[Children in poorest areas more likely to enter care](#)", *Community Care*, 28 February 2017.

3 The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, "[The Case for Change](#)", June 2021, page 24.

but they can do just as much damage as the abuse that alternative care is meant to protect children from.

We are also 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.

Provision: Social workers and legislation should differentiate between abuse and neglect, and poverty or lack of access to necessary support and resources. As it stands, many children and young people are removed from the care of loving families because the state will not provide adequate support — and yet there is money to pay alternative carers. Redirecting this to systematic pro-poor redistribution and the funding of state services which are free at the point of delivery would substantially reduce the number of children who are taken into care.

Participation: As it stands, children and young people experience participation as a tick-box, tokenistic performance which is, at times, actively damaging to them. Many would prefer no participation to the ‘participation’ currently offered. Systems of listening to children and young people and allowing their input into their care need a complete overhaul, and must be informed by listening to children and young people’s expertise on how this can be done in a non-stigmatising and meaningful way. Trust children and young people to understand the complexity of the situation. With time and respect they can have meaningful input, but this must be built on trust — which for many children and young people is currently very much broken.

Our plea

“A basic principle should be that you don’t make changes which make things worse for us.”

“Perhaps our governments should be learning from us and our families!”

All of us want children to grow up with a sense of belonging, connection, and roots. And yet in Britain today, more children are being removed from their families and put into care than at any time since the 1980s⁴ when policymakers began to argue that families should be kept together and the removal of children should be a last resort.⁵ We consider the current system of children’s social care inappropriately adversarial and too focused on investigation and taking children away.

The children and young people we have spoken to have important insights into their own situations and those of their peers. They deserve to be trusted and taken seriously as partners so that their lived experience can guide policymakers toward a culture change in social care away from damaging child protection practices to supporting families in adversity, parents and children together.

4 Curtis, P., [“The Poor Parents”](#), Tortoise Media, 27 April 2019.

5 [“The troubling surge in English children being taken from their parents”](#), The Economist, 22 March 2018.

Submission #2

Our rights, our say

Submission prepared by ATD Fourth World based on consultations run by Kaydence & Aurelia Drayak from Teen Advocacy with 22 care-experienced children, 15 of them in Scotland and the other 7 in Canada. Twenty of these children were between the ages of 13 and 18. The other two were aged 9-12.

All of these children have been in foster care. Most experienced several placements and a couple have had many different placements. Nobody had just one.

Four of the teens were removed from their parents at birth. Most were removed between the ages of 4 and 10 years old. Most have been removed long term. Six have been placed in kinship care. Nobody was removed for less than six months. Some have been in children's homes and some have also been homeless. Two teens have been placed in secure mental health units. None of these units are children's units. Being placed in adult mental health facilities was very upsetting. Two teens have also been placed in youth correction facilities.

A few of the teens were in kinship care after foster care. Some went home after being homeless for a while. Some had no contact with their families during their living apart from their family, while others had contact. One is searching for his birth family after his adopted mum and dad sent him back to foster care.

1. Our take on our rights

Do we have rights?

"We know that the UNCRC says we have rights. But it doesn't always feel like we do."

"If we have rights, adults should take us seriously, even when there are difficult decisions."

"If rights were a priority, we'd be told about them and they wouldn't be sidelined."

Rights and wrongs – our rights should not harm us

"Sometimes our rights are respected – but sometimes they are misused in ways which harm us."

"Not everyone knows about children's rights – but even people who do don't always respect them."

Rights and relationships

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

"But there are differences in how we're treated by different people – both adults and children."

"Perhaps our governments should be learning from us and our families!"

2. Alternative care and our rights

Alternative care and abuse

"Alternative care is right for children who are being abused – but not for children who aren't!"

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

"Even if things are tough at home, alternative care doesn't mean our needs are met."

Balancing our rights is important

"Alternative care might give us some opportunities – but it takes away others."

"Alternative care should be about us – but sometimes it feels like it's just about politics."

Our right to family life

"One of our rights is to family life – and alternative care takes that right away from us."

"Being placed in alternative care can feel like we and our families are being discriminated against."

"Family life gives us access to our identity – alternative care can rob us of that."

"We don't want people to blame our parents – often they did nothing wrong!"

"People say alternative care is about protecting us – but we think it infringes lots of our rights."

Listen to us!

"We are meant to have the right to be heard – but adults often ignore this."

"Going into alternative care takes away the power we have over our own lives."

"Adults think they can protect us – but we need to have a say too, and we don't need heroes!"

3. Families and communities

We lose so much

"Being placed in alternative care has torn our families apart and ruined our relationships."

"Everyone is affected by the decision to put us in alternative care."

Our emotions and our mental health

"Losing our families makes us feel sad, angry, and stigmatised."

"It has an impact on our mental health, and we don't have the people we need to help."

"This shapes who we are and who we will be – it takes away our trust and hope."

We are part of our communities

"Taking us out of our communities harms everyone and harms our culture."

"Communities could be a source of support – but often they are a source of stigma for us."

4. What should be changed?

Don't make things worse

"A basic principle should be that you don't make changes which make things worse for us."

"Short-term solutions can create much bigger problems in the long run!"

"When the system is so broken it is difficult to know what to say."

Keep families together

"More could be done to keep families together rather than tearing them apart in alternative care."

"In our experience the reasons for removing us from our families are not always right."

"And even if alternative care is necessary, let us keep in contact with our family!"

Support families

"If support was given to families, children might not need to be put in alternative care."

"Poverty should never be a reason children go into alternative care – give families money!"

"Helping families stay together should be the priority – alternative care is a last resort."

Listen to children and families

"Children are more capable and thoughtful than adults often think."

"We want you to listen to our families, too – they want what is best for us."

"This is important – it is our lives, and the lives of our families and communities."

And hold decision makers accountable!

"Our families aren't the only people who should be held responsible for their actions."

"It's impossible to get on with our lives if we are scared of what the government will do to us."

"If the government focused on solving big problems, alternative care would not be needed."

Submission #3

This submission is based on the transcript of an interview of Tiegan, a 19-year-old woman living in the UK (North Yorkshire) who has experienced alternative care. The interview, carried out by ATD Fourth World, took place over Zoom on 8 May 2021. As a baby, Tiegan spent a few months in a mother-and-baby unit with her mother, who was incarcerated at that time. Tiegan then lived with her father and grandparents, before moving to foster care for two years. At age 4, she was adopted. Her sisters are both in care, with her 12-year-old sister in a residential care home.

How should adults care for children?

- **Standards for material well-being are too high**

“We have too high standards in most Western and developed countries of what a well-cared for child is. When my sister got taken into care, one of the issues they had against my mum was that she was sleeping on the sofa. My two sisters need space because they've both got special needs. And they said 'Well that's not a proper bed', but who's defining a sofa as not a proper bed? There's too much pressure on parents to buy all this fancy schmancy stuff. If they can't afford it, but they can afford a big bean bag that their kid sleeps on, does it really matter?”

- **Provide a safe space to express themselves freely**

“Children need independence and freedom to go out and explore the world, but they need somewhere they know they can go back to that's safe and welcoming where they can restore their mental health if they need to. They should be allowed to talk. A well-cared for child will have people listening to them all the time. Their opinions from a young age will be valued as much as anyone else's. Even if they say stupid things, they should still hear 'That wasn't the wisest thing, and we can't take you up on that idea, but this is why'. They need things explained. If you keep saying 'don't do that', the child will grow up thinking 'well why *can't* I do that?', and probably do more damage later in life.”

The impact of Covid-19

- **Rigid and isolating protocols**

“My sister had a COVID scare. She tested negative but was in a 10-day quarantine, literally locked into her bedroom for 10 days. Staff weren't allowed to see her, they talked through her door with a mask on. She's 12 years old, and she's got autism. She's tactile, she needs hugs. She got none of that and was on the edge by the end of quarantine. Care homes are known for protocols, being bureaucratic. Children there haven't had the support and friendliness we need in this scary time when some kids are really anxious about COVID.”

“Contact visits with family are now a lot harder, because it's not well managed. A lot of kids in care don't know when that contact will happen, if it'll be allowed, or how will it happen. Will they have to social distance from their parents? What other family members are they seeing? It's so tough because you're already taken away from your parents. That contact session might be the one time you get to see them every month, but you're not able to hug your own parents, even if they're right there. Kids in care already have enough to deal with, and the pandemic too, and they don't really have any family members to talk to about it.”

Care homes are “not like family homes. They're run with policies, bureaucracy, and rules. They're non-flexible. It's like 'Here's your rule book', but they don't work. These are children, not adults, so don't make it seem like a prison. You can't put a load of policies and rules on children, it just doesn't work out.”

“If policymakers actually went into care homes, they would be very surprised.”

How to avoid alternative care?

- **Early preventative support**

“Parents and families need support when the child is youngest. Between ages 0 and 4, there's little to no support. That is a big issue.”

Professionals should regularly offer help and ask parents: “How're you holding up? Do you need any support?” They should almost go through a questionnaire: ‘Are you okay with your mental health? Any issues you're wanting to bring to a doctor but you haven't had time? Anything else going on? Are you struggling with anything? These are services you can access,’ When kids need to go for [doctor] appointments is a good time to grab the parent and go, ‘How're you doing?’. Ten minutes to just get it out and talk would make it convenient for parents.”

- **Consider parents' needs**

There needs to be “more mental health support, and more understanding of parents’ trauma and backgrounds. It needs to all change.”

As an infant, Tiegan fell very ill with meningitis. “There wasn't any support for my father, or anyone reaching out to him saying, ‘I know this must be difficult, what you’ve just been through was hellish. Here’s our support and understanding’. In his panic, my dad thought he had nearly killed me. How did they expect him just to pick up and go ‘I can do this’? Even though he was looking after me well doesn't mean that he wasn’t having an internal battle.”

- **Tailor guidance to parents' needs**

“I've met many different social workers who have a negative view of fathers. That needs to change.”

“Sometimes parents have struggles like potty training. They’re like, ‘What am I doing wrong?’ There are books; but why is that limited to books? Some parents will be illiterate. We need more workshops for parents because with the way the world keeps changing, the way you were brought up is very different to how you’re meant to bring up your child.”

“When it's found that kids are now living with a single parent, or their parents have mental health issues, there should be extra support and monitoring almost, check-ups of that parenting, because they're the more vulnerable kind. For parents who may be more vulnerable, it's better to be ready to help quickly, rather than letting it get to crisis point, when it's too late for real help.”

- **Appreciate parents' efforts**

“Professionals stress weaknesses, weaknesses, weaknesses! Even things I would count as strengths, [social workers] saw as weaknesses for some reason. But if there are concerns about a child, they should bring in the parents and say, ‘We see you're doing this really well, it's cute how every day the child runs up to you and gives you the biggest hug, but there’s some concerns about what you're feeding them’.”

“Parents need to step away from their roles and responsibilities for a few hours to just purely have some good old fun with their child.”

What support could be given to children who might face greater challenges to stay with their families?

People in need should be prioritised. Tiegan's mother and two sisters with disabilities needed a larger home. While they spent more than two years on a waiting list for a three-bedroom house, both sisters were placed in care for two years. Tiegan also points to the lack of available council housing, which required her father to accept housing far from any support network.

"If there are concerns about children—for example, my sister with behaviour issues—they need to actually diagnose them because sometimes that unlocks the door of services. Diagnosis is the rare gem that hardly anyone gets. I only got it because we basically fought our way through the system, with all the power we could."

- **Be understanding of parents' efforts**

"There's so much pressure: 'A parent should be able to look after their child 24/7, until they're 18 at least'. But no parent can do that, let alone a parent with a disabled child, because they are human, and they only have a certain amount of energy and motivation."

What support should be given to children with greater challenges so that they can enjoy equal rights in alternative care?

- **Respect and embrace different backgrounds and cultures**

"Sometimes with people's ethnicities and migrants, we think, 'They'll just want to keep their own culture'. But actually they might be very willing to accept and be part of our culture as well. Don't start forcing them: 'You're from Pakistan, here's all the Pakistan stuff', because sometimes they're a bit like 'Thanks, but I came to England'."

"You need open spaces for refugees or migrants to talk and work through what they've experienced. If there's a particular dress style, allow that to happen. There should be books and videos to watch about different cultures."

"It matters to meet people from various ethnicities and cultures and spend time with them. Activities like dances might be really important to them to be part of. [...] Crafts are key, or even visual representations about culture and ethnicity, like a hallway having a map of how we're all from different places, but living under the same roof."

- **Staff training about disabilities**

"If they know they're going to have a blind child for example in care, they should give the staff workshops, seminars, training, saying 'this is part of a package we will put on for all staff on how to deal with this blind child', rather than just going in there themselves blind, and going 'Well, this will work out' which it won't."

"Care homes are too regimented. They should adapt house rules when they get certain kids in and make individualised plans for each child."

"In a home, everyone's an individual with different needs, different ways of functioning. That'd be a good development lesson: everyone learns different, everyone lives different."

- **Support those with more challenges**

"Kids need space to say what they're thinking. In care homes, it can just be social workers or care staff with them, and kids can feel a bit scared to talk to them, thinking 'You're just looking at your tick box here.'"

"Staff should regularly say 'Are the things we put in place for you helping? And if not, what do you need that will help you be the best person you can be?'"

"Sometimes that's all kids need, especially after a stressful day, they might need a hug."

"The staff should go on a rota of two hours where they are just sat in a living room or bumbling around the care home, accessible to the kids."

"That's the issue with care homes sometimes: they don't feel informal, but that is your home."

- **More freedom for children**

"It's hard enough trying to get siblings to get on with each other. Why do we put six kids with different backgrounds, different traumas, and just go 'Right, you're now siblings basically, and you're going to get on, no arguments, and if you have an argument we're going to ground you.'"

"Not all children can be friends with one another. Sometimes you've just got to let kids be kids, and adults need to respect that."

What can adults do to make sure children and young people are safe from harm in alternative care?

- **Facilitating relationships between children**

“They should not force people together. It's a lot more damaging if you try to force kids together because if they get into arguments, either they will run away, this is the extreme, or they might hurt each other.”

“They should tell children in alternative care 'We're just going to give you your own space. Not everything should come with a punishment. It's better to have discussion, and open space to talk and work through things.’”

- **Increasing the number of visits allowed**

“My sister was only meant to have one face-to-face a month but she wanted another one. She was getting so distraught and the care home kept going ‘No you can't, it's not within the protocol', or 'the courts haven't allowed that'. Give them the same freedom they would have got if they were with family or parents. The point of care is children having a better life, [not] being restricted from doing day-to-day things they would have done if they were at home.”

Advice for adults providing help in alternative care

- **Understand that alternative care is difficult for children**

“It's losing your parent basically. Even if they're there, you've lost them in some ways, and you've lost your family. You might not be able to see certain family members for months, if not years.”

“You still have to be disciplined with kids in care, and you still have to treat them not too differently, but also with respect.”

“Show that you care about them, you've thought about them, you're ready to discuss with them.”

How can adults help children to know or find out about where they came from, their culture, language or other parts of their identity?

- **Allow children to educate themselves about their own background**

“Give them access to as much as possible that's connected to their background or their culture.”

What kind of support do children and young people need when they are changing care placement?

- **Discussion and preparation**

“Let them see the new placement before they actually move, meet the main staff, and just have some time to see it, rather than just walking in. Let them talk to the new placement staff beforehand.”

“Organise fun activities ... just going to the park, or a movie evening, or even a picnic in the back garden, something so they can get to know each other.”

What kind of support do young people need when they're leaving alternative care?

“The harsh reality is that kids leaving care are thrown out and are meant to just be adults on their own at age 16.”

- **Provide help if requested after they leave care**

“They might need respite care for two or three days, so they can go somewhere and get a couple of meals cooked for them.”

“They need contacts for different services, like mental health support, special needs support, lots of other support.”

“Before they're left alone, staff should know that they have at least some basics like a chair or table or bed, cutlery, and that they feel comfortable.”

“They should get peer support from the care home.”

“The best way for them to feel supported, is that they don't just feel like the 'care kid' who social services had enough of, and now have thrown out.”

This interview was carried out with support from the Coalition to End Child Poverty.

Submission #4

Our take on alternative care: family, relationships, support

We — Paige, Bennett and Tianna* — are care experienced young people aged 19-20 living in supported accommodation in the West Midlands (UK) with our support worker Camryn. Francesca, a care-experienced adult, interviewed us about our experience of alternative care for ATD Fourth World. These are some of the things we want to say about: **family and relationships; and about support.**

5. Family and relationships

When you grow up in alternative care it takes a long time to make sense of family relationships.

“I did end up developing a hatred towards my mum, because I didn't understand like why she didn't want me and stuff like that, you know. It was just hard and because I couldn't see her as well, all my questions that I had couldn't really be answered.” (Paige)

Our relationships with our siblings are really important and really complicated.

“My older sister, as soon as she turned 16, she got in touch with them. She's all pilly pally with my biological family, acting as if like, it's fine.” (Tianna)

“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 because I'd spent so long under my sister's wing. And that was the only thing I kind of had to my biological family.” (Paige)

* These are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the young people.

This can be really difficult when social workers are inconsistent with us and our siblings.

“They banned me from seeing my mum; but when my little brother and my sister went into care, they were allowed to see her. So it was like if she’s such a bad person, why can they go and see her and I can’t? It just didn't really make sense.” (Paige)

We know family is important – at school everyone else talks about it! We deserve to know about our family, too.

“All the people I've gone to school with and stuff they have a family and they know their background. They can go to their nan's house, they know cousins.” (Paige)

Deciding what to do when we’re old enough to trace our biological family is difficult – and they have expectations toward us that don’t feel realistic.

“Now I've become a care leaver, I'm supposed to go and find my family on my own: I'm supposed to go and act like nothing ever happened, I'm supposed to just go to all these family meet-ups and just pretend that I know everyone. Everyone knows me and it's like, I don't know these people.” (Paige)

“My biological dad was trying to convince me to move to where his family lives and it's like: 'I don't know you, you've only just started talking to me'. They've only just told me my biological name. He just told me that I've got five different siblings and God knows how many cousins, and it's like, why the hell would I uproot from where I am now to somewhere where I don't know anyone. I mean I got adopted for pretty good reasons, I wouldn't change myself for a family that didn't make changes to keep me.” (Tianna)

Alternative carers just aren’t the same as having a family of your own.

“I'm kind of tired of being in a situation or finding myself with people, and then all of a sudden, when things change, it's like everything just gets pulled away. Because it's kind of like I still have my foster carers, but it's different, because now I know they're not my parents; but they're going to have to look after other kids. It's different now.” (Paige)

"I started calling my mum not my mum, I'd say 'you're not my mum don't tell me what to do', which obviously hurt my mum because me and my mum used to have a really good, strong relationship. Then as soon as we got told that we were adopted, like the click of your fingers, that relationship just broke down between me and my mum. Anytime she told me what to do, I'd be like, 'you're not my mum, you can't tell me what to do!'" (Tianna)

Support

We know our families had problems – but we'd have liked to see them get more support before we were taken away from them.

"My mum was a young mum, so I feel like maybe, if someone tried to support her, instead of just taking her kids off her, it could have been different." (Paige)

"I would have changed that process, and brought in additional services to have given a timescale for things to have changed, and been given that opportunity. And I would also have introduced family into it, because that was never an option within my circumstances or some circumstances; it was just not even said, let alone done." (Francesca)

Social workers aren't able to give us the support we need – they are too focused on the process.

"Sometimes it is hard talking to a social worker. With my 18-plus worker, I know that when she comes we're going to talk about this, this, this and this, and that's basically the main reason why she's coming out." (Paige)

The meetings and procedures we have to go through are not helpful – we don't want them.

“Every eight months we're supposed to go to an interview. We'd have to go to a room with a massive table, there was like four people, and me, the child. That does not hold the child's attention. If you did something wrong throughout the year,

it was more like we were put on call.” (Bennett)

“I feel like it's a bit ridiculous because you've got someone who sees me every year sitting there, and you've got my carer, you've got my social worker, you've got their link worker, and I'm just supposed to sit there and tell everyone how I feel.” (Paige)

They're organised in a way that makes us stand out and gets us bullied.

“We had to get an independent evaluation plan too – who the hell has those? Just because you're adopted does not mean you get treated differently, but you know, that's when you get bullied, because people notice the difference.” (Tianna)

“Teachers will come in and be like, ‘oh, can I just pull her out of class!’. Everyone asked me, and you know exactly that all you're going to do is go and sit in a room and talk about your educational needs, and then have to go back into class, and explain to everyone where you were, or make up a lie of where you were. It's just like, why?”

(Paige)

The way they hold meetings is like we're criminals.

“It was like going to court every year, having everyone stare at you like ‘we heard that this had occurred, do you want to explain further?’ And you've got 4 or 5 people's eyes staring at you like ‘um, this got sorted and dealt with.’” (Paige)

“When I ran away from school, I got put into a meeting with like five different teachers.

They watched me literally walk out the front door, because I was getting told off for something that a teacher caused. The teacher grabbed me by the blazer and I told them to get their fucking hands off of me, because teachers aren't supposed to touch you.

So the teacher went and told the head teacher that I'd sworn at them,

so I was getting put in isolation for something that she had caused,
because she never told them that she grabbed me by the blazer." (Tianna)

The language social workers use about us is not OK for us.

Camryn: I can vouch for that as well, because last year or the year before, we used to always have to fill out a review on you all, and it would just be something social services would send over, but it would be like, 'how does the child play with others?'

Tianna: I sincerely hope that if you did that with me you did not say that I happily sit around the table playing dominoes with people who I don't even have a clue about.

Camryn: It would just be stupid things like that, like 'does the child do things independently?'

Bennett: The 'child' is 17 or 18!

Procedures to 'listen to us' are tokenistic and insulting.

"You were in the hot seat and everyone's staring at you, and everyone's going to read out everything about you. And it's the same thing all the time, it's not like now you're older, let's talk about something different. It's the same things I told you when I was 11 years old, when I was 15, it's the exact same, you asked me the same questions, it's not really going to change. It's the same generic questions that you asked everyone.

Like, what do you expect from me?" (Paige)

"They'd say 'what do you want to do with your life?' I'd be like well, I want to be a professional basket-baller, when my choices in school would have been like health and social care and something else, no but no, 'okay, professional basket-baller'. Does it even matter what I say at this point, like I could say anything to you, and you're just going to smile and say, 'okay, that's great.'" (Paige)

We aren't told about the support we can get until it's too late.

“I basically got involved in the Birmingham Children’s Care Council, but that was when I was about 16 or 17. So, that is run by the Advocate Service. Now, I didn’t even know there was an Advocate Service. I didn’t even know people could have advocates, and I mean, it was nice, knowing that advocates were there, but I think personally for me, it was a bit too late at that point.” (Paige)

Children in alternative care need real support – not box ticking.

“What they should have done is the second someone moved into care, instead of coming out and asking questions that they will know over the phone, they take that child out for the day, so they can bond, instead of just sitting in the living room going ‘yeah, yeah, that’s all good’.” (Bennett)

“I would just tell them whatever would make them happy, so I could leave.” (Paige)

Our support needs don’t end when we turn 18 – but it can feel like the support we receive does.

“Four weeks is all I got to find a job, make sure I’ve got everything. I walked in at one point and my carer just went, ‘you’re leaving in four weeks’. Like, alright. I haven’t even received the text from her to say, ‘are you okay? Do you need anything?’ It’s been ‘bye’, no more contact. No more nothing. You want something from her? No.

That’s why I’m afraid to text her, I don’t like her any more.” (Bennett)

“There’s just so much stress. Because it was weird for me, because my foster family was completely different from my biological family, so it was like being pulled in two different directions where ‘we want you to be like this’, ‘well, we want you to be like this’. And I’m in the middle. Sometimes I would just run away. I’d just go to random places, and I even still do it now, and it’s just because it’s what I’m used to, when things get too much and I get too overwhelmed, I’ll just run away, whether that’s physically, mentally, I’m just away.” (Paige)

This interview was carried out with support from the Coalition to End Child Poverty.

Submission #5

Our take on alternative care:

information, identity, voice, autonomy and independence

We — Paige, Bennett and Tianna* — are care experienced young people aged 19-20 living in supported accommodation in the West Midlands (UK) with our support worker Camryn. Francesca, a care-experienced adult, interviewed us about our experience of alternative care for ATD Fourth World. These are some of the things we want to say about: **information and identity; and about voice, autonomy and independence.**

Information and Identity

Growing up in alternative 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.” (Paige)

“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

* These are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the young people.

mind, I'm doing this because you forced me to do it, because you didn't help me."
(Bennett)

We wanted to express who we were, but we quickly learnt that people didn't really want that.

"Once I started to get a little bit more freedom, my room wasn't as clean as it was, because I like it like this. But the second my carer walked into my room, that's why I got kicked out, because my room was a mess. But that was how I liked it, so the second I showed myself,
it was like okay we don't want them." (Bennett)

"I can't be bothered. When she decorated, I just let her do the room as she wants to. Because now I'm just going to have to defend myself again.

Because if I say I want a bright red, 'why would you want that?'" (Paige)

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." (Paige)

"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." (Tianna)

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." (Paige)

"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." (Tianna)

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." (Tianna)

"You don't tell someone who you haven't seen for 20 odd years, 'oh yeah, by the way I was doing this whilst pregnant, and this person did to this to you whilst I wasn't there' and all that; that's not something you want to hear, you know, if it's something like that.

I'd rather have been told, sooner rather than later than having to deal with it now."
(Tianna)

Other people know who's in their family – we should have that right too.

“Growing up with a family home, from young, and then being told, 'wait, no, this isn't your family, your actual family is that your mum's a single mum, your dad is nowhere to be found, and the last name you have is not actually your dad's last name, it's someone else's last name'.” (Paige)

Social workers often assumed we couldn't handle information because we were young – but we were already handling really difficult things. We should have a right to know about ourselves.

“I don't think they really put so much effort into focusing on younger children, because they just go like, 'oh, they don't understand, they don't get it'. Growing up with my mum, I didn't see what everyone else saw, like the big issues, the big problem. Maybe if someone actually sat down and showed me all this stuff... But it took time for me to find it out on my own, kind of do my own research and stuff, and that brought me into sort of a dark place, because going through it by yourself, it's just not easy.” (Paige)

“I was just like, well, are we allowed to talk to them or anything like that? Because me and my little sister wanted to understand better, because our older sister was already in contact with our biological mum, and we asked if we could have contact with our mum to understand why she made the choices she made. And they were like 'no, you'd get upset' and all that crap so they basically made the choices for us, which annoyed me.”
(Tianna)

If social workers don't tell us, other people might – and things can go really wrong for us if that happens.

“Basically growing up, I didn't actually register that I was in care until I was about, say like seven. When my sister said that she got a card from mum and I was like 'what do you mean, mum's in the kitchen', and she was like 'no, not that mum'.” (Paige)

“I was happy, I wasn't getting bullied and all that crap but then, as soon as I got told, my oldest sister went round the school we were in telling everyone 'oh my god, I was adopted'. You know, some people at the school understood it, some people didn't. So because she made that choice to tell everyone, me and my little sister would get bullied for it, and they'd say 'you don't have a real family'.” (Tianna)

Voice, autonomy and independence

Growing up in alternative care, we had a lot of responsibility but no autonomy or choice. Social workers thought they knew what was best for us – they rarely thought to ask us what we wanted.

“It's kind of just like 'this is the best view, and you might not see it but this is how it's going to be, and you'll thank us later down the line'. That's it.” (Paige)

Children in alternative care aren't all the same – we need social workers to pay attention to us as individuals.

“I feel like it's all about treating everyone individually. You can't say, 'oh, we're not just going to tell you because we've had past experiences with someone who doesn't want to know', or 'we are going to tell you because we've had experiences with someone who did want to know'. It is about everyone being able to have their own experiences. Because just like me and Tianna: I would have preferred to have known, and Tianna would have preferred not to know. It's completely different, but it's all about sitting down, talking and finding that out. It's about knowing the person you're working with.”
(Paige)

When life is structured around care plans and meetings, it feels like we are having to serve the system – the system doesn't care what we want, we just need to tick the social workers' boxes.

“I used to lie about loving karate. I'd said I didn't want to do it, and I got completely ignored. They're just like 'well, you do it, or we take this off you'. Just like, 'oh Jesus alright, I'll do it'. I was forced to do it or else... it got to the point where I got off the bus from coming home, and I'd walk around the same area for an hour, so I could skip karate, because I never liked doing it. You've got to stop forcing children, because it's ruining their personality and their identity. It's like dragging what they like away from them, and going 'no, that's bad'.” (Bennett)

“They say, ‘You’re great at it though’. But it doesn't matter how great I am. If I don't like it, I just don't like it. I'd come in late all the time, and they'd ask me ‘why are you late all the time?’ I'm just sick of this repetitive life that I have to live that pleases everyone else but me. I'm tired.” (Paige)

When we're in care we're not allowed any independence, but when we turn 18 suddenly independence is all our social workers care about.

“For me it was weird: my carers wanted me to stay, and my social worker just kept saying well, independence is important. Me and my carer we would argue sometimes but I just felt like she didn't want to support our relationship, she just wanted to be like ‘okay, well, if you're not getting on, well, I think it's just time to go’. And then it was just like, yeah, she's probably right. And then I did, and it was just like, why did I leave? I wasn't ready, I'd had people telling me ‘yeah, you're ready, do it, it's fine, it's not that difficult’. And then it happened and it was like: well, it is difficult.” (Paige)

This interview was carried out with support from the Coalition to End Child Poverty.