

Written evidence from Support Not Separation & Disabled Mothers' Rights Campaign (CSC 184)

Education Committee

Children's Social Care

Background

The [Support Not Separation Coalition](#) (co-ordinated by Legal Action for Women) includes organisations of single mothers, women of colour, women with disabilities, rape survivors, breastfeeding advocates, psychotherapists, men and individual social workers and former social workers who share our perspective. We defend mothers and children against unwarranted separation and the devaluing of the mother-child relationship. We are in contact with hundreds of mothers and other primary carers, children, family law professionals, organisations and concerned individuals. Our publications include [Suffer the Little Children & their Mothers](#) published in 2017 and updated [research](#) published in June 2021.

The [Disabled Mothers' Rights Campaign](#) (DMRC, co-ordinated by WinVisible) brings disabled mothers together to defend our right to have and to keep our children. We campaign to stop the cruelty and discrimination we face from social services and the family courts which use mothers' requests for council support as an excuse to label us "unfit" and take our children from us. DMRC is part of the SNS coalition.

Our experience

The independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022) recognised that poverty is a key factor in children being removed, as years of austerity have resulted in 14 million people living in poverty including 4.3 million children. Poverty defined as "neglect" and domestic violence are the main reasons for removing children from mothers and families. Our experience of the prejudiced assumptions against mothers/families who are low income, working class, of colour, have disabilities and/or mental distress, have grown up in "care", by social workers, children's guardians, psychologists and judges, was borne out by the government's [Harm Report](#) which found a pattern of "sexism, racism and classism" against mothers and children in the family courts. The fact that the courts operate in secret has enabled them to escape the discipline of public scrutiny, particularly in relation to judgements removing children from mothers and other primary carers, usually with devastating implications for the rest of those children's lives, and for their mothers and families. Abuse of power by the state and profiteering by the "child protection" industry are crucial to understanding why so many children are in the "care" system, more now than at any time since the 1980s.

Our proposals for improving Children's Social Care

- **Recognise the bond between mother and child** as the child's first and most crucial relationship. Supporting mothers is the best way to ensure children's health and well-being.

- **Prioritise implementing financial support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989** with a view to keeping families together. Why aren't mothers and kinship carers (mostly grandmothers) getting the same financial support as foster carers?
- **Implement Care Act support for disabled mothers** who have caring responsibilities for a child. Stop taking children from disabled mothers on the basis that having a disabled mother is "harm" to a child. Support for "child carers" should start with adult social care services for disabled parents.
- **Address child poverty by addressing mothers' poverty**, especially single and/or disabled mothers, often of colour, who are among the poorest and most likely to be targeted for intervention by children's social care.
- **Stop taking children on the basis of "neglect" conflated with poverty** – "neglect" is the single biggest category of child protection plans (see [Nuffield Foundation](#)). There is already legislation in California forbidding poverty being used as neglect to take children, and a Special Committee in Philadelphia proposes that **neglect should be removed from the law.**^[vi]
- **Stop taking children into care because of domestic violence and end the use of predicted "future emotional harm"** which enables social workers prejudices and manipulation to justify taking children from loving mums.
- **Victims of domestic violence must be helped to escape** and live independently from violent men. The "[presumption of contact](#)" in the Children Act **must end** so violent fathers are not allowed unsupervised contact or residence of children. Now that the fake science of "[parental alienation](#)" has been formally rejected from inclusion in the Domestic Abuse Act and its Statutory Guidance, CAFCASS and other professionals **must be stopped from using "parental alienation"** in court to undermine mothers and children who raise safety concerns about contact with fathers.
- The **discrimination** that results in so many [children](#) (including those of colour/taken because their parents have no recourse to public funds) taken into "care" **must be acknowledged and ended**. Other discrimination against mothers who have grown up "in care" or are [sex workers](#) must also be acknowledged and ended.
- **End the discrimination in The Working Together document** (2018) which assumes all parents need safeguarding referrals, and results in mothers in poverty or asking for help due to their own or their children's disability being treated as having harmed their children. "Child protection" must be separated from "child in need".
- **Recognise that the harm caused to children by separation** from mother and siblings, and by being uprooted from all that is familiar, **invariably outweighs the difficulties children may face within their families**, the majority of which could be overcome with proper financial and practical support.
- **Provide the support families ask for**, rather than what social workers decide is appropriate, which invariably means intrusive and degrading monitoring and prejudicial judgements. Strengthen communities by providing cash and services, not by adding layers of professionals whose priority is intervention, not support.

- **Follow the lead set by [Dr Andy Bilson](#) in the 1970s** which showed that when social workers were allocated money to help families rather than to take children into care, up to 70% fewer children were taken.
- **Remove privatisation from children's services** to end the profit motive – obscene profits made by private providers/agencies for fostering, residential children's homes, adoption, etc., are feeding the “child protection” industry which wrecks the lives of children and families.
- **Give mothers and other primary carers a Care Income** so that the work mothers do caring for children is financially recognised and no mother can be accused of neglect because she is poor. This would protect mothers and children from professionals abusing their powers and acting as if they know best, as if the children belong to the state and not to their families. Foster carers receive between £400 and £600 a week – why not mothers whose caring work would prevent the institutionalisation of children and avoid lifelong trauma?
- **Open the family courts** so that decisions made there are open to public scrutiny.
- **Reinstate legal aid** for all family law cases.

RESPONSE to Education Committee

Is the current provision of children's social care sufficient to meet demand?

This question assumes that there is a demand for children's social care in its current form. In fact, children's social care is an increasingly punitive industry based on prejudice, profit and risk aversion, rather than in any way led by the needs or demands of children, young people and their families. Current provision is not sufficient, but families do NOT want or need ‘more of the same’. Instead there must be a completely different approach which starts with the aim of providing real practical help - such as direct financial provision to mothers.

What factors are causing the increase in demand for children's social care?

The industry of child-removal is resource intensive. By identifying more children as ‘[at risk](#)’, children's social care is driving its own demand. Too many children are [needlessly taken](#) through “child protection” – investigations have increased by 127% in the past 11 years, but the number which did not result in a “child protection plan” (i.e. proved to be unwarranted) went up by 211% over the same period.

In order to reform children's social care, there needs to be government action to tackle rising rates of child poverty, domestic violence, and mental ill-health. The government completely ignores the impact of policies which over the last 20 years have deliberately cut resources and support available to mothers and children, as well as cuts to benefits, including via sanctions, and community services. Research shows that children are [10 times](#) more likely to be taken into care from less affluent areas. The millions spent on institutionalising children must be redirected towards supporting mothers and other primary carers, or kinship carers, so children can stay safely with their families. Services that have been decimated must be reinstated, especially for victims of domestic violence.

Instead, the government has a “six pillar” plan over the next two years to extend the power of the “corporate parent” by: extending the reach of social workers into every community under the guise of “Family Help”; increase the number of foster carers and social workers;

create a new “child protection lead” that could lead to the removal of the independent Child Protection Conference chairperson and independent oversight; and continue to allow massive profiteering by private companies running residential homes. The only measure which may be helpful, the recognition of kinship care, is promoted in just seven areas but is not accompanied by any financial support for kinship carers.

Unlike mothers who are constantly investigated, blamed, and punished, “child protection” professionals have near-total impunity. Those running residential homes, social workers who harmed children by forcibly removing them from loving families, police who didn’t act to protect children and even criminalised them when they reported the violence, they were suffering ... are not even mentioned by the government, nor is the complete failure of Ofsted to monitor and condemn conditions in so many residential children’s homes run for profit.

What are the recent trends and causes of out-of-area placements?

It is bad enough that children are removed from their mothers - this pain is compounded when they are placed out-of-area - often vast distances from their homes and families. Children placed out-of-area tend to be older, with more identified needs - those children seen as ‘hard to place’. Placement providers set up homes in poorer areas where housing is low cost, in order to maximise their profits.

The current social care market, including private sector care homes and care homes run by local authorities;

78% of children’s homes in England are run by the private sector - this is a 26% increase over the five years to 2022. The current social care market is a damning indictment of what happens when prices are put on children’s lives - [obscene profits](#) are made from children and mother’s misery. With private provision dominating the market, private companies can pick and choose which children to accept into their homes - they are more reluctant to accept children who are seen as ‘higher risk’, as this could negatively impact their profit.

Children of colour are [over-represented](#) among children “in care”, and are most likely to remain in institutions mostly run by private companies, rather than be placed with families.

In February 2022, [analysis](#) by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (NFJO), found increasing numbers of children were being put before the High Court to be considered for unregistered placements where they would be subject to deprivation of liberty, simply because there was a lack of regulated placements available. Unlike children held in other settings, children deprived of their liberty by family courts don’t appear in published administrative data or records. This is a major cause for concern as there is no public record of where they are placed, what restrictions are placed on their liberty, or their outcomes.' ([NFJO, 2022](#)).

The reasons behind the rising cost of children’s social care for local authorities, and ways to mitigate this;

The [recent report](#) commissioned by the Local Government Association found that the largest 20 independent providers of children’s social care brought in profits of more than £300 million in 2022. When there are above inflation fee increases, it is no wonder the cost is rising exponentially. England should follow the example of Scotland, where for-profit provision in foster care is illegal.

[Adoption is an industry](#) where children are worth [huge sums of money](#) to private companies.

What measures can be undertaken to improve early intervention;

Since 2015 [spending on removing children](#) has increased by 30% to £9bn, whilst spending on keeping families together has been cut by 50% to £2.2bn. Spending should be reversed, so that resources spent on child removal go instead into keeping families together.

How combinations of kinship care, residential education, foster care and adoption could provide alternatives to residential care;

Whilst we welcome a move away from residential care, we do not agree that adoption and foster care should be used as an alternative. We welcome the needs of kinship carers being addressed, in particular the proposal in 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' to provide additional funding to them, although the details of this proposal were not spelled out. We support the Scottish Kinship Care Alliance which has been campaigning for kinship carers to be paid on a par with foster carers.

- Kinship Carers - need to be financially supported on the same basis as foster carers, as do the mothers.
- Residential Education - this is NOT in the best interests of children but easier on the Local Authorities. Mothers should be supported in their Educational Health Care Plans rather than threatened with child removal if they want support for education and then cruelly removing children rather than supporting them at home. Segregated education has been proven not to be the best source of education.
- Foster care - vast amounts of money are spent on putting children into foster care - this money should be spent supporting mothers. Incentives to foster carers such as paying for house extensions should be stopped.
- Adoption - the practice of forced adoption must be [stopped](#). It is a way of the Local Authorities not having to provide support to the families because once adoption happens they have no financial responsibility. [Research](#) also shows that 1/3 of adoptions fail completely and a further 1/3 are broken down and traumatic.

How children's social care can impact a child's educational or long-term outcomes and ways to improve outcomes for care leavers;

Simply not taking children into 'care' would improve outcomes. It is widely acknowledged that the [outcomes for care leavers](#) are disastrous: they are over ten times more likely than their peers to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) by 21; when they leave care, 50% will be in the criminal justice system by age 21; 25% will end up in prison; 50% have mental distress; 70% die prematurely and are 20 times more likely to die by age 25.

The specific experiences of disabled children or children with additional needs within children's social care, how they differ from their peers, and ways to improve their experiences;

Time and again when mothers ask for support for their children with disabilities and/or with special educational needs, instead of getting support, their children are investigated under Child Protection or taken away by Children's Services. Mothers are entitled to ask for help but are too often either ignored or accused of exaggerating their children's needs, in some cases accused of Fabricated Induced Illness, another reason for taking children from loving homes.

A disproportionate number of disabled children are in 'care', as families with disabled children are hardest hit by poverty and discrimination, especially if we are single mothers. Parents with learning difficulties in England are more than 50 times more likely to have their child taken into care than other parents, an investigation by [Channel 5 News](#) found. Working closely with [WinVisible](#) and [Support Not Separation](#) their results are based on freedom of information responses from 116 local education authorities in England.

Once they become 'looked after', disabled children are 'hard to place' and often end up miles from home in provision which doesn't meet their needs, or in the worst cases actively harms them. Disabled children are more vulnerable to abuse and neglect, a risk which can increase when they are exposed to multiple professionals and carers. Mothers and primary carers, and disabled children themselves, are not recognised as experts in their own experience.

While Councils refuse mothers the support we are entitled to under the Children Act and the Care Act they spend many more millions on taking our children from us and placing them in institutions run mostly by private companies profiteering from our pain. [Disabled children](#) removed from their disabled mothers, despite never suffering any harm in their mothers' care, are four times more likely to be abused in care. Disabled mothers and single mothers generally are more likely to be living in poverty, and social services use our poverty as 'neglect' to remove our children. The fact is that living costs are higher for disabled mothers, made worse if our child also has a disability, and we often have to cut back on food to feed our children.

How effectively Ofsted works as a regulator and inspector for children's social care.

There have been repeated scandals involving thousands of children "in care" and/or forcibly taken by social services being raped, abused, exploited, and even murdered, for example [Oldham](#), [Oxford](#), [Rochdale](#), [Rotherham](#)... to name a few places. Ofsted has not guarded against any of this.

Homes which [Ofsted](#) has monitored have also been [exposed](#) as being places where children have been neglected and abused, and for [Ofsted](#) to ask private homes to monitor other private providers is scandalous given the lack of care and serious safeguarding concerns in these homes. Ofsted is not fit for purpose.

The government's children's social care implementation strategy, Stable Homes, Built on Love, released in February 2023, including: How effective the strategy has been so far,

Please refer to our detailed [response](#) to 'Stable Homes, Built on Love'.

How effective it is projected to be in the long-term.

The strategy will not be effective in the long term because it made no proposals to redirect the millions used to remove children towards supporting mothers and other primary carers so children can stay safely with their families.

Additional evidence on Children's Social Care to the Education Committee submitted by Support Not Separation & Disabled Mothers' Rights Campaign

We make these points further to our submission in January 2024

In addition to our proposals for improving Children's Social Care

We draw attention to the recent (December 2024) Guidance to family court judges issued by the [Family Justice Council](#) in relation to cases where mothers report domestic violence and abusive

fathers counter this with allegations of ‘parental alienation’ to force their children to see them. They have confirmed that *“parental alienation syndrome” has no evidential basis and is considered a harmful pseudo-science*. Giving greater protection to women victims of domestic violence (who are the majority in both private law and public law family court proceedings) is vital to ensuring children’s safety, and that of their mothers.

For 8 years we have campaigned for the [Family Courts to be open](#) and we welcome the recent (27 January 2025) opening of the courts in England & Wales to reporting by journalists and legal bloggers. This is a massive victory for the movement of mothers challenging sexism, racism, disability discrimination and class bias in family courts. We hope that more public scrutiny of rulings made in family courts will lead to fewer children being removed from mothers, including many fewer children being taken into “care”, as judges and professionals will be no longer be able to hide behind the secrecy of the courts to make draconian rulings taking children from loving families.

The reasons behind the rising cost of children’s social care for local authorities, and ways to mitigate this.

It was reported to the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill Parliamentary Committee (22 January 2025) that every year budgets allocated to S17 of the Children Act (to support families) have been reduced by 50% whilst budgets for S47 (for child protection and removal) have more than doubled every year. This means that very often when families ask for support, they are told no help is available for cost reasons and they are pushed into child protection rather than receiving support in the community. It is urgent for S17 spending to be put on the same footing as S47 spending – ie made a statutory duty instead of optional and for spending on support to be prioritised over spending on child removal.

Local authority spending on [private residential care](#) placements for children has increased by almost a quarter over the last year with an increase of £400m to £1.8bn. Councils reported spending £13bn on children’s services in 2022/23, a 12% increase in cash terms on the previous year. While they spent £7bn on services for looked-after children, £3.3bn on safeguarding children, they only spent £1.6bn on Section 17 to support families in the community. Despite the ever increasing spend on residential homes, the quality of care is too often abusive and/or neglectful and there are no real checks, despite Ofsted inspections.

We recommend the [Welsh Government’s](#) programme for government which contains a commitment to remove profit from the care of children looked after. By doing this they say ‘We want to see fewer children and young people entering care’.

[Neath Port Talbot](#) had one of the highest numbers of children going into care in the country, but by supporting families in the community they have halved the number of children in care and now have one of the lowest rates in Wales, despite contacts to the team increasing by 53%. The work being done in Neath Port Talbot should be replicated in every local authority to enable children to stay safely with their families rather than being taken into “care” where the outcomes are known to be devastating.

January 2025