



SUBMISSION TO UN COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL & CULTURAL RIGHTS PRE-SESSIONAL WORKING GROUP MARCH 2023

Introduction

1. This is a parallel report from 4in10 London's Child Poverty Network and Little Village to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) ahead of its 72nd pre-Sessional Working Group taking place between 06 and 10 March 2023. We hope the report will help the Committee to formulate its List of Issues as part of its review of the UK Government's performance under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).
2. [4in10 is London's Child Poverty Network](#). It is comprised of over 450 organisations and individual members working to improve the lives of the 4 out of 10 children living in poverty across the capital. Our collective belief is that all children have a right to grow up free from poverty and that failure to protect this denies children the freedom and dignity that others enjoy. We work with our members for a future free from child poverty in London.
3. [Little Village](#) is a charity that fosters a village of support and solidarity for families on low incomes with children under five in London. It equips families with pre-loved kids' clothes and baby essentials as well as linking them with key services. It also works alongside parents to fix the system that keeps them trapped in poverty. Little Village is a member of the 4in10 Network.
4. In compiling this report, we have sought to follow a human rights-based approach, working in partnership with a small group of mothers who are part of Little Village's community. These mothers decided that they wanted to focus this submission on their experiences of struggling to access safe and affordable housing, a lack of access to basic necessities and difficulties accessing childcare and therefore being able to work. Accordingly, this report relates primarily to the enjoyment of rights under Article 11 ICESCR – the right to an adequate standard of living, and Article 6 ICESCR - the right to work. It contains evidence that the UK Government has failed to meet the standards outlined in the Convention related to these rights. It focuses on the experiences of families with very young children under 5 years of age living in London.

5. This report contains a number of suggested questions for the Committee to put to the UK Government in the List of Issues. These are the questions that the women who developed this report with 4in10 and Little Village would like the Government to be asked.
6. A fuller description of the process we have followed to develop this report is included in the annex, but in summary we have drawn on both first-hand experiences shared at a workshop held in December 2022 with mothers who are in low-income households (hereafter referred to as the 'December workshop') as well as research and surveys carried out by Little Village and 4in10, official statistics and other relevant research reports.

Context: child poverty rates and the cost-of-living crisis

7. In 2022 Little Village commissioned the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) (a charity that conducts and funds research aimed at solving poverty in the UK) to look at the rates, patterns, and severity of poverty among families with babies and pre-school children in the UK. This found that 1.3 million of the 4.2 million children in poverty in the UK are babies and children under the age of five. This is a situation that is getting worse. The total number of children in poverty is predicted to rise by 2023/24 to 5.2 million – an additional 1.1 million children.¹
8. While the latest poverty statistics show that North East region of England has the highest poverty rates for this group, with 47% of children in families with an under-five facing poverty, London has the largest number of young children living in poverty, and those in London are living in deeper poverty with average household income at 66% of the poverty line.²
9. The context for this report is one of spiralling prices, driving the worst cost-of-living crisis we have seen in the UK for over 40 years. The country has seen historically high levels of inflation over the past 12 months which have had significant impact on families on low-incomes. This has made life *even* harder for the 4 million children already living in poverty for whom things were already tough after benefits have fallen in value in eight of the last ten years.³

¹ Little Village (April 2022) [It Takes a Village: The Little Village family poverty report 2022](#) p. 3

² Little Village (April 2022) [It Takes a Village: The Little Village family poverty report 2022](#) p. 6

³ House of Commons Library, [Benefits Upgrading 2022/23](#), 2022

Article 11(1) The right to an adequate standard of living – incorporating the right to housing

Experiences of inappropriate and unsafe housing

10. The women who took part in the December workshop identified a lack of access to safe, secure housing for themselves and their children as one of the most acute issues they face and an issue that they wished this report to draw the Committee's attention to.
11. Several of the women were or had previously been placed by their local authority in temporary accommodation. They had found this to be inadequate for their needs and damaging to their mental and physical health as well as that of their children. While temporary accommodation is intended to house homeless families only for short periods of time, this was not the case for the women and others they knew. They told us that in their experience it can last for as long as 5 years.
12. Housing is often overcrowded, with families being put in studio flats and single bedroom properties when they need multiple bedrooms for multiple children. One of the women shared an experience of the housing authorities claiming a flat was a 2-bed, when by official standards the second room was so small it did not actually qualify as a bedroom. This experience is supported by a report from the housing charity Shelter which found that 35% of homeless parents said their children do not have their own bed and are forced to share with another family member.⁴
13. The housing families are provided with is often unsuitable and unsafe:
 - *"They do not care about the needs of the people living in the building."* There are laundry facilities where you have to pay £7 to do a load of laundry and it is down 20 flights of stairs. There is no lift, and it is very difficult to get up and down with a small baby and the washing. Some residents are disabled so its inaccessible for them.
 - Services often fail and are not repaired quickly. One of the mothers told us how the electrics in her flat were off last week (December 2022) for two days and no-one had been able to tell her when she could expect it to be serviced.
 - Another shared, *"When I had a studio flat with my son, it was so damp. Every time I called they just say you have to wash it [the walls]."* This mother mopped the floors each morning due to the damp and her son now has to use an inhaler. She reflected, *"The news of the death of the little boy due to mold made me really sad. Me and my sons were living in a similar place. They*

⁴ Shelter (December 2022) [Growing up Homeless](#)

would just say wash it and I would wash it, but it would keep coming back. My son has an inhaler because of living in mould.” The death she was referring to was that of Awaab Ishak who died in 2020, eight days after his second birthday, as a direct result of black mould in the flat he lived in, in Rochdale in the North West of England.⁵

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR UK GOVERNMENT:

How can the Government reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation so families can be moved to adequate, permanent accommodation that meets their needs?

Why does the Government claim some flats to be two-bedroom, when they are in fact only one bedroom and insufficient in size to meet the needs of the families placed there?

The impact of living in poor housing conditions on physical and mental health

14. Inadequate housing has a detrimental impact on children’s mental health. The mothers we spoke to at the December workshop reported that their children showing signs of depression due to overcrowded housing. One mother shared, *‘Children are depressed because of sharing bedrooms. So, they may act out at school because their needs are not being met at home.’*
15. There is also an impact on parents’ mental health. One mother commented: *“When you are in poverty, housing really affects mental health, and you can’t move because the rent in London is not affordable.”* The women at the December workshop also told us that families were often cut off from potential sources of support. For example, in temporary accommodation there is often a ‘no overnight visitors’ rule meaning that mothers have had to cope completely on their own overnight after giving birth, despite there being obvious need for them to have the additional support of a partner or family members.
16. Overcrowding in housing can have a detrimental impact on children’s development. A mother with an infant told us that, *“[...] we live in a studio flat so the kitchen and living area are all in one space so I have had to put my baby in a highchair in the corridor when I am cooking as the fumes are not safe.”* She also explained that the space is very small and has concrete floors which means her crawling baby does not have enough space to move. This is concerning because young infants need space to crawl to develop their gross motor skills.

⁵ [Death of two-year-old from mould in flat a ‘defining moment’, says coroner | Housing | The Guardian](#).

17. Similar experiences were related by parents taking part in the focus groups Little Village held as part of their research for the *It Takes a Village* report, published in 2022, for example:

“I have been living for 18 months in a single bed with my son, for 18 months now, I don’t have another bed in the hostel. I have to share a bathroom, kitchen and everything. It’s been too long, we have bunk beds but my son does not want to sleep alone so he sleeps together with me in a single bed. Sometimes, people share beds next to us, some are drunk and fight, so it really is not good. I also now have a back problem and I am not sleeping well.” – Focus Group Participant

18. As noted above, housing for those on low incomes in London, especially temporary accommodation, is often in a bad state of disrepair and lacks basic facilities such as a working cooker. Women at the December workshop told us their experiences of poor ventilation which means children are exposed to cooking fumes, mould which has caused long-term respiratory illness for some children and pest infestations (mice) which the authorities do not deal with, expecting residents to pay for removal themselves.

SUGGESTED QUESTION FOR UK GOVERNMENT:

Why, when having a medical emergency or needing additional care, are guests not allowed to stay overnight in temporary accommodation?

Why hasn’t the mould and pest infestation been legally acknowledged as a responsibility of the Government acting as landlord?

Poor communication and barriers to enforcing rights

19. The women also described how they were not treated with dignity and respect by officials. One reported; *“When you are living in temporary accommodation, the staff are constantly looking down at you.. they don’t respect the people living in the building, they are very rude and some are racist, they treat people differently. Sometimes we will have a leaking ceiling, or the heating is not working and it will take so long to solve any issue”*

20. This lack of responsiveness from the authorities was a recurring theme in the workshop. The women told us that they are not updated on progress with their housing applications; phone calls are repeatedly ignored and they had learnt that unless everything is written down and in a legal or formal tone where you demonstrate your rights on this issue, there is little or only an extremely delayed response:

“I have spent 6 months in temporary accommodation, and I have had trouble getting a bidding number [to get a permanent property], when I call them [housing authorities] no one picks up, the phone just keeps ringing”

“It takes so much energy to get anything done. I have a lady in my building who helps me write letters once they know you know your rights they do it... but you can't keep talking it has to be in black and white because then you have proof!”

21. Further evidence of the lack of dignity and respect shown to families was provided by the women when talking about their experiences of being rehoused: *“If you are re-housed they only give you two or three days to move or even say you have to move the same day.”* This mother received a phone call at 4.50pm telling her to move that same day with her children, while pregnant. The accommodation was not ready, but she was told that if she didn't sleep there that night she would lose the flat. She had to return to her previous flat the next day to move her and her children's belongings.

SUGGESTED QUESTION FOR UK GOVERNMENT: Why can't Legal Aid be better funded to help families claim their rights?

Evidence that these issues are widespread across London and the UK

22. The experiences of women we spoke to reflect those of other families across the UK. Between October 2021 and February 2022 Little Village conducted a national survey of families with children under five facing financial hardship in the UK.⁶ Families were given room to share their own stories within the survey, and they also conducted five focus groups with 21 families to capture their experiences in more depth, in addition to individual interviews. These families reported that poor housing is both a cause and a symptom of poverty in the early years. In the survey:
- 43% of respondents said they do not live somewhere that meets their family's needs
 - 41% said they do not live somewhere that is affordable
 - 52% said that they do not live somewhere that has enough space for their family
 - 43% said that housing conditions had a negative impact on their child's development or health
 - 52% said that housing conditions had a negative impact on their health (physical or mental) or that of their partner

⁶ Little Village (April 2022) [It Takes a Village: The Little Village family poverty report 2022](#) p. 11

23. Official statistics corroborate this picture; showing that the housing crisis facing families living on low incomes in London is acute. There is a severe shortage of social housing (that is housing provided by the local council or a housing association) in London. Between 2016 and 2021 London saw a 30% increase in households on local authority waiting lists and now nearly 300,000 are waiting for social homes.⁷ Families not able to access social housing are forced to rent privately, which is very expensive. Research carried out in 2022 has shown that fewer than one in ten properties listed for private rent in the capital are affordable to Londoners who depend on welfare support for meeting their housing costs.⁸ As a result more and more families are at risk of homelessness. In August 2022 London Councils (the cross-party group on London councils) estimated that 125,000 low-income households in the capital are at heightened risk of homelessness because their benefit entitlement now falls short of meeting their rent.⁹
24. In part due to the lack of affordable housing, many families end up in ‘temporary accommodation’ that is housing provided by the local authority to those who have become homeless. Between January and March 2022, 75,820 children were living in temporary accommodation in London.¹⁰ People are more likely to be given temporary housing accommodation if they are pregnant, have children, are elderly or are at risk of domestic violence. The rate of households living in temporary accommodation in London is much higher than elsewhere in England: while 18 per cent of all English homeless households are in London, 59 per cent of all English households in temporary accommodation are in London.¹¹
25. The problem of poor quality and unsafe homes is also widespread across the city. Analysis carried out by the Greater London Authority in 2022 has shown that 43 per cent of London’s social housing – approximately 343,000 social homes – do not meet the current Decent Homes Standard (DHS) and an energy efficiency rating of EPC band C.¹² In the private rented sector (PRS) the situation is also serious, across England 21% of homes in the PRS do not meet the DHS with 12% having a Category 1 hazard, therefore posing a significant safety risk.¹³

⁷ London Data Store (2021) Households on Local Authority Waiting List, Borough. Retrieved from:

<https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/households-local-authority-waiting-list-borough>

⁸ London Councils (August 2022) [London’s housing affordability crisis set to cause homelessness spike](#)

⁹ London Councils (August 2022) [London’s housing affordability crisis set to cause homelessness spike](#)

¹⁰ MHCLG, Statutory homelessness live tables, Detailed local authority level tables: January – March 2022, Table TA1

¹¹ Centre for London (Sept 2022) [Temporary Accommodation: London’s hidden homelessness crisis](#)

¹² Mayor of London (December 2022) [Mayor calls for emergency Government investment as 343,000 London families living in social housing below minimum standards](#)

¹³ Shelter (April 2022) [Briefing: Poor Quality Conditions and Disrepair in Private Rented Sector Housing](#)

Accessing basic necessities

26. The women taking part in the December workshop highlighted not being able to afford everyday necessities for their young children as a priority area that they wished to draw the attention of the Committee too. They spoke about not being able to afford basic things like nappies and clothing, due to rising prices.
27. Little Village aims to support families like these which face significant pressures on limited budgets by operating baby banks across London, providing them with high quality re-used clothes, buggies, beds, toys and books. In 2022 Little Village carried out a survey of the 200 baby banks operating in local communities across the UK to identify the impact of the current cost-of-living crisis. 55 baby banks responded to the survey and some of the key findings were that:
- 91% of baby banks said they see children wearing ill-fitting shoes or clothes (i.e. no coat or shoes too small)
 - 89 % said families are unable to afford basic hygiene products (soap, toothpaste, bubble bath)
 - 87% said families are unable to pay the bills
 - 83% said families are forced to ration nappies
 - 79% said families are unable to heat the home
 - 73% said children are going hungry
 - 70% said children have no safe place to sleep (i.e. sleeping on floor or in bed with parents or siblings)¹⁴
28. Provision of baby equipment and clothing by baby banks allows families to meet children's primary needs of safety, wellbeing and development. The report describes how prior to support, families report having inadequate provision of key items relating to child safety and wellbeing. For example, beds for children, without which families have no choice but to co-sleep with their new-born which is not recommended by health professionals and should only be done carefully with consideration for the safety of the baby. Women who had been supported by Little Village said: *"I would have had nowhere to put the baby when I came home from the hospital"* and *"I only have a single bed so I would have slept on the floor and given the baby my bed."*¹⁵
29. The situation of many families with young children who access Little Village's baby banks and other similar services are compounded by Government policies which deliberately reduce already low benefit levels to a level at which they are inadequate to meet their basic needs. These include the two-child limit policy which restricts their access to benefits support for any subsequent children and the benefit cap which restricts their overall access to benefits. Families with no recourse to public

¹⁴ Little Village (2022) [Baby banks: Supporting babies and young children through the cost-of-living crisis](#)

¹⁵ Little Village (2021) [2021 Impact Report Little Village](#)

funds because of their immigration status and younger parents who receive a lower level of benefits are also hit hard.¹⁶

Article 6: Right to work

Lack of access to childcare as a barrier to work

30. Another issue that the women at the December workshop highlighted as a priority for the Committee to examine was the barriers that prevent them from exercising their right to work. They wanted to work to increase their incomes to support their children, but this was impossible given the lack of affordable and accessible childcare available to them. They also felt that this led to employers discriminating against parents, one mother noted that it *“[f]eels like you have to hide being a parent from an employer so they don’t discriminate when hiring you.”*
31. When families are housed, especially in temporary accommodation, this is often far away from existing connections including employers and wider families and other sources of support. One mother told us how she was moved from south to north London, which meant, she would have to travel up to 2 hours each way to drop off her child with a family member who could provide childcare while she worked. The high costs of travel and subsequent loss work-time mean that this is not financially viable. Unable to make work pay this mother must rely on a small maternity payment: *“I receive £626 a month and that is it. I have to buy nappies, electric every week... the money goes like that.”* Another woman, reflecting on the very high costs of childcare, asked *“How can I work with 3 kids?”*
32. Unaffordable childcare is driving parents out of work and into debt. For parents with children who are yet to start school, childcare is a prerequisite to being able to partake in work or training. The absence of affordable childcare therefore becomes a significant barrier to parents moving forward and escaping poverty. 41% of the families on low incomes Little Village surveyed in 2021/22 were in work. For many families with young children, work does not pay due to the high cost of childcare. In the survey:
- 67% said that the cost of childcare stops them from being able to work or doing the job that they want to do
 - 23% said that they had lost a job due to lack of suitable childcare
 - 27% said that they had left a training or educational course due lack of suitable childcare.¹⁷
33. Polling commissioned by 4in10 in September 2021 among a representative sample of Londoners echoes these experiences. The poll found that childcare costs were felt to

¹⁶ Under Universal Credit single parents who are under 25 are treated as single people and receive the lower standard allowance (£265.31), while those over the age of 25 receive a higher amount (£334.91)

¹⁷ Little Village (April 2022) [It Takes a Village: The Little Village family poverty report 2022](#) p. 12

be the biggest driver of poverty in the city.¹⁸ This reflects the fact that total childcare costs in inner London are 30% higher than elsewhere in the country.¹⁹ These high costs and the failure of central government to uprate the childcare element of Universal Credit means that for many families across the city, especially lone parents, it is no longer possible to make work pay, even on a part-time basis. For families with children who are disabled or have special educational needs, the barriers are even higher, due to a lack of affordable, high-quality provision that meets their children's needs.

SUGGESTED QUESTION FOR UK GOVERNMENT: Why isn't childcare addressed as a clear need when the costs faced by families are a barrier to work?

Conclusion

34. Contrary to the UK Government's assertion in its 7th periodic report to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that it is "*committed to a sustainable, long-term approach to tackling poverty*"²⁰ we believe that the evidence set out in this report shows that the Government is in fact failing to protect young children and their families in London from the damaging effects of poverty and is breaching their rights under ICESCR, specifically Article 11 (1) The right to an adequate standard of living and Article 6 the right to work. As the cost-of-living crisis in the UK continues to reduce living standards and threatens to push hundreds of thousands more children below the poverty line, we urge the Committee to listen carefully to the voices of the women who have shared their experiences in this report and put their questions to the UK Government.

January 2023

¹⁸ 4in10 London's Child Poverty Network (October 2021) [Flying Against Gravity: the lived reality of poverty in London](#)

¹⁹ Child Poverty Action Group (June 2021) [The cost of a child in London: help with childcare 'woefully' inadequate](#)

²⁰ [The United Kingdom's 7th periodic report under the United Nations Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(ICESCR\)](#) (May 2022)

ANNEX – How this report was produced

In Spring 2022, 4in10 London's Child Poverty Network approached its members to invite them to work with it to co-produce a submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ahead of the UK Government's examination by the Committee. We also engaged a consultant with over 20 years' experience in the youth and community sector and a strong background in human rights to help facilitate the project and guide us in taking a human rights-based approach.

Over Spring and Summer 2022 we had a series of conversations with several organisations who expressed an interest in being involved. These conversations involved an element of capacity building, as staff at the member organisations had limited knowledge or experience of the UN human rights monitoring system. While there was significant interest and enthusiasm for taking part, lack of capacity among voluntary organisations which were responding to increased need in their communities as a result of the cost-of-living crisis meant that in the end only one organisation, Little Village, was able to participate.

In December 2022 we held a workshop with a small group of mothers living on low incomes who are part of the Little Village community. At the workshop the participants looked at quotations from parents and carers who had contributed to recent Little Village research reports and mapped these against the articles set out in ICESCR. This led to a discussion about which of the rights the women thought were the most important to focus on in this submission. The idea of this was to make sure that those taking part felt some ownership over how their experiences are represented to the committee, rather than us simply extracting information and then interpreting it in our own way.

When they had identified the priority areas these were discussed in more detail, with the women sharing their own lived-experiences. As part of the discussion the women also put forward specific questions they would like the Committee to put to the UK Government. Three note takers recorded these conversations and where possible, quotations were captured verbatim. Where it was not possible, we have paraphrased contributions as accurately as possible based on the three sets of notes.

The report was then drafted by staff at 4in10 reflecting the agreed priorities and incorporating the experiences shared at the workshop with data from research and surveys carried out by Little Village and 4in10, official statistics and other research reports. Participants were reimbursed for their time and this submission shared with them. We hope to explore how 4in10 can continue to work with Little Village and the families they support, to use the report to advocate for implementation of ICESCR in their communities.