

GUIDE: Supporting Guardians of Unaccompanied Children

Grant Agreement No. 101141170 — GUIDE — AMIF-2023-TF2-AG-CALL

Policy Publication

D5.6

Key information

Deliverable number & name	D5.6 Policy publication
Deliverable type	R — Document, report
Date of publication	M26 (June 2026)
Principal Author	Stefanos Alevizos (IASIS)
Partners Contributing	All organisations

Dissemination Level

Sensitive	
Public	X

Release history:

Version	Date	Reviewer(s)	Notes
1	04/06/2026	Stefanos Alevizos	Draft
2	29/06/2026	All partners	Finalisation

Project information

Grant agreement	101141170
Programme	AMIF
Topic	AMIF-2023-TF2-AG-CALL-06-CHILDREN
Type of action	AMIF Project Grants
Project acronym	GUIDE
Project title	GUIDE: Supporting Guardians of Unaccompanied Children
Project starting date	01.04.2024
Project duration	30 months
Project end date	30.09.2026

Table of contents

Executive Summary	5
1. Introduction	6
1.1 About GUIDE	6
1.2 Purpose of the Report	6
1.3 Sources of Evidence	6
2. Supporting Guardians as a System Responsibility	6
3. Lessons from the Listening Circles	8
4. Key Lessons from GUIDE	17
4.1 Guardians Need Both Competence and Support	17
4.2 Supporting Professionals is Part of Supporting Children	17
4.3 Guardianship as a Relational, Rights-Based and System-Dependent Practice	18
4.4 Disability Inclusion Remains an Unfinished Agenda	18
5. Towards More Resilient and Inclusive Guardianship Systems	19

Executive Summary

Unaccompanied children are among the most vulnerable groups within migration and child protection systems. Many have experienced family separation, displacement, uncertainty, disrupted education, and, in some cases, violence, neglect, or trauma. For children with disabilities or developmental difficulties, these challenges are often even greater. In this context, guardians play a central role in helping children access their rights, navigate services, participate in decisions, and build pathways towards safety, inclusion, and long-term wellbeing.

The GUIDE project was developed to strengthen the capacity of guardians and improve the quality of guardianship systems across Europe. Working across Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Slovakia, the project focused on supporting professionals and guardians who work with unaccompanied children, particularly children with disabilities and developmental difficulties. Through capacity building, system mapping, peer learning, and reflective practice, GUIDE sought to address common challenges that continue to affect guardianship systems in different national contexts.

Evidence gathered throughout the project highlights several important lessons. First, effective guardianship requires a broad range of competencies that go beyond legal representation. Guardians need knowledge of child rights, migration procedures, disability inclusion, safeguarding, case management, communication, and interagency cooperation. They must also be able to build trusting relationships with children and support their meaningful participation in decisions that affect their lives.

Second, guardians cannot be expected to carry this responsibility alone. The findings underline the importance of continuous professional development, access to support networks, opportunities for peer exchange, and mechanisms that encourage reflection on practice. Investing in guardians should therefore be understood as an investment in stronger child protection systems.

Third, the inclusion of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties must become a core component of guardianship practice rather than a specialised or separate concern. Children often face barriers when accessing services, receiving appropriate assessments, or participating in decision-making processes. Addressing these barriers requires closer collaboration between child protection, disability, education, health, and social care services.

The GUIDE experience also demonstrates the importance of coordinated systems. Effective referral pathways, clear roles and responsibilities, multi-agency cooperation, and child-centred approaches all contribute to better outcomes for children. At the same time, significant challenges remain, including uneven access to specialised services, fragmented support structures, and differences in guardianship practices across countries.

The lessons emerging from GUIDE point towards a clear conclusion: strengthening guardianship is not only about improving the knowledge and skills of individual guardians. It is equally about building responsive, coordinated, and inclusive systems that enable guardians to fulfil their role effectively. Future policies and programmes should therefore focus on both dimensions, namely supporting guardians and strengthening guardianship systems, to ensure that all unaccompanied children, including those with disabilities and developmental difficulties, receive the protection, support, and opportunities they need to thrive.

1. Introduction

1.1 About GUIDE

The [GUIDE project](#) was developed to strengthen guardianship systems for unaccompanied children across Europe, with particular attention to children with disabilities and developmental difficulties. Working across Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Poland and Slovakia, the project brings together child protection organisations, disability experts and European networks to address common challenges faced by guardians and professionals. Through training, peer support, system mapping and policy development, GUIDE aims to improve both the capacity of individual guardians and the quality of the systems that support them. At its core, the project promotes a child-centred, rights-based and inclusive approach to guardianship, recognising that effective protection depends not only on individual professionals but also on coordinated and responsive child protection systems.

1.2 Purpose of the Report

This report presents the key lessons emerging from the implementation of the GUIDE project and explores their relevance for future policy and practice. It focuses on what has been learned about supporting guardians and strengthening guardianship systems for unaccompanied children, particularly those with disabilities or developmental difficulties. Rather than describing project activities, the report brings together evidence, experience and practical insights to identify challenges, highlight promising approaches and inform future developments at both national and European levels. The report is intended to support policymakers, guardianship authorities, child protection professionals and organisations working with unaccompanied children.

1.3 Sources of Evidence

The analysis presented in this report draws on multiple sources developed throughout the GUIDE project. These include the initial assessment of guardianship systems and training needs across participating countries, the development of a competency-based training framework, and the evaluation findings from the national training programmes implemented under Work Package 2.- Transnational child care training program. The report also builds on the methodological framework established for the Listening Circles under Work Package 3, which introduced a structured model of reflective practice and peer support for guardians. Together, these sources provide a broad understanding of the competencies, challenges and system-level factors that influence effective guardianship. Findings from the ongoing Listening Circles process will further enrich future analysis and strengthen the evidence base for policy development.

2. Supporting Guardians as a System Responsibility

The GUIDE project developed a comprehensive Training of Trainers (ToT) programme and an accompanying training manual aimed at strengthening the competencies of professionals working with unaccompanied children across Europe. The programme brought together trainers and practitioners from five participating countries representing diverse professional backgrounds, including child protection,

social work, migration services, psychology, education, legal support and related sectors. Following the international ToT, national training activities were implemented in each country, adapting the educational content to local legal, institutional and service delivery contexts while maintaining a common competency-based framework.

The curriculum addressed a broad range of topics considered essential for effective guardianship and child protection practice, including children's rights and the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, best interests determination, child participation and communication, safeguarding and protection from violence, trauma-informed approaches, disability inclusion, referral pathways, interagency collaboration and practical case management. To assess the effectiveness of the programme, a structured evaluation system was implemented across participating countries, combining pre- and post-training assessments with national-level evaluations. These evaluations examined changes in participants' knowledge, confidence and perceived ability to apply the acquired competencies in practice, providing the empirical basis for the findings presented in the following sections.

A broader lesson emerging from the GUIDE training programme concerns the nature of effective guardianship itself. While the evaluation was primarily designed to assess changes in participants' knowledge and confidence, the findings also provide valuable insights into the competencies that appear most relevant for guardians working with unaccompanied children.

The training was implemented across five countries and involved a diverse group of professionals working within child protection, migration, social care and related services. Pre- and post-training surveys indicated improvements in participants' knowledge and confidence across multiple thematic areas, suggesting that guardianship requires a broad and multidimensional set of competencies rather than expertise in a single field.

The evaluation findings highlighted the importance of child rights, best interests decision-making, communication with children, safeguarding, referral mechanisms, disability inclusion and interagency cooperation. Participants consistently reported that these areas were relevant to their professional responsibilities and could be applied directly in their daily practice. This suggests that effective guardianship depends not only on understanding legal procedures but also on the ability to translate rights-based principles into practical action.

The findings also reinforce the importance of relational and communication skills. Guardians regularly work with children who may be navigating unfamiliar systems, experiencing uncertainty or facing multiple forms of vulnerability. Supporting meaningful participation and helping children understand complex procedures therefore requires communication approaches that are accessible, child-centred and responsive to individual needs.

Another important lesson concerns the role of system navigation. The positive response to training content related to referral pathways and service coordination reflects the reality that guardians frequently operate across multiple sectors. Effective guardianship requires the ability to identify appropriate services, coordinate support and facilitate access to resources that contribute to children's protection, wellbeing and inclusion.

The training experience further highlights the value of continuous professional development. Improvements in knowledge and confidence across participating countries suggest that guardianship competencies can be strengthened through structured learning opportunities. At the same time, the findings indicate that training is most effective when it combines theoretical knowledge with practical tools, case-based learning and opportunities for professional reflection.

Taken together, the evaluation results suggest that effective guardianship should be understood as a competency-based practice. The role requires a combination of rights-based knowledge, communication skills, system navigation abilities and professional judgement. Strengthening these competencies is therefore not only beneficial for individual professionals but also contributes to the quality and effectiveness of guardianship systems more broadly.

While the training programme demonstrated that structured learning can strengthen guardians' knowledge, confidence and practical competencies, the Listening Circles provided complementary insights into the conditions required to sustain and apply these competencies in everyday practice. In particular, they highlighted the importance of reflective spaces, peer support, emotional resilience and organisational coordination, suggesting that effective guardianship depends not only on individual capacity-building but also on ongoing professional and systemic support.

3. Lessons from the Listening Circles

The Listening Circles generated a rich body of qualitative evidence on the professional experiences, needs, challenges, and reflections of guardians and child protection professionals working with unaccompanied children. While the training programme strengthened participants' knowledge and competencies, the Listening Circles offered complementary insights into how these competencies are experienced and applied in practice, highlighting the emotional, relational and systemic dimensions of guardianship. The material should not be understood simply as a record of group meetings or as an activity output. Rather, it provides important insight into how professionals experience their role, how they interpret the needs of children, how they manage emotional and ethical complexity, and what types of support they consider necessary for more effective guardianship and child protection practice.

The Listening Circles are particularly important because they capture dimensions of professional practice that are often less visible in formal reports, evaluation tools, or training questionnaires. They reveal not only what professionals know, but also what they feel, what they struggle with, what they need from systems, and how they make sense of their responsibilities. In this sense, the Listening Circles function as a qualitative evidence mechanism within the GUIDE project.

The present report analyses the Listening Circles through a qualitative and interpretive lens. The aim is not to measure impact statistically or to count how many participants referred to each issue. Instead, the report identifies recurring patterns of meaning, shared concerns, tensions, silences, and cross-cutting themes. The findings are therefore presented as an analytical synthesis of the material rather than as a descriptive summary of individual sessions.

Overall, the Listening Circles show that work with unaccompanied children is relationally demanding, ethically complex, emotionally intense, and highly dependent on the quality of the wider protection system. Professionals and guardians are not only required to follow procedures. They are also expected to build trust, manage uncertainty, interpret trauma-related behaviours, support participation, coordinate services, and remain emotionally available to children who may have experienced separation, displacement, violence, neglect, loss, or prolonged insecurity.

A central conclusion emerging from the analysis is that supporting professionals is part of supporting children. Guardians and child protection professionals cannot provide stable, sensitive, and rights-based care if they themselves remain isolated, emotionally overloaded, or unsupported by fragmented systems. The Listening Circles therefore point to the need for reflective, resilient, coordinated, and disability-inclusive guardianship systems.

Methodological Approach

The analysis follows a qualitative thematic approach. The material was examined for recurring themes, patterns of interaction, professional concerns, emotional content, and the ways in which participants framed their work with unaccompanied children. Attention was given not only to explicit statements but also to underlying meanings. This means that the analysis considered visible topics such as trauma, legal procedures, communication, professional boundaries, and service coordination, as well as deeper dynamics such as emotional labour, moral responsibility, uncertainty, professional isolation, and the need for belonging.

The report is guided by key principles of qualitative research. First, the material is interpreted contextually. Participants' reflections are understood in relation to the professional and institutional environments in which they work. Second, the analysis focuses on meaning-making. The Listening Circles are treated as spaces where professionals construct shared understandings of their role and their challenges. Third, the report remains sensitive to contradictions and silences. What is absent or weakly represented in the material is considered analytically meaningful, especially in relation to disability and developmental needs. Fourth, the analysis avoids overgeneralisation. The findings should be read as a structured interpretation of the available material, not as a representative statistical measurement of all guardianship systems.

Seven major themes were identified:

1. **Emotional burden and professional vulnerability.**
2. **Peer support, belonging, and collective resilience.**
3. **Systemic complexity and fragmentation.**
4. **Rights-based and ethical professional identity.**
5. **Trauma-informed understanding and practice.**
6. **Professional resilience, self-care, and secondary trauma.**
7. **The limited visibility of disability and developmental needs.**

These themes are interconnected. Emotional burden is intensified by systemic fragmentation. Systemic fragmentation is harder to manage without peer support. Rights-based practice is difficult to sustain without professional resilience. Trauma-informed care requires both individual competence and organisational support. Disability inclusion depends not only on awareness but also on referral pathways, specialised services, and adapted communication.

Theme 1: Emotional Burden and Professional Vulnerability

A central finding across the Listening Circles is the emotional burden carried by guardians and professionals working with unaccompanied children. Participants reflected on anxiety, responsibility, uncertainty, fear for children's future, difficulty maintaining boundaries, and the emotional impact of being close to children's traumatic experiences.

This emotional burden should not be interpreted simply as ordinary work-related stress. The material points to a deeper form of professional exposure. Guardians and child protection professionals are often positioned close to children's histories of displacement, family separation, violence, instability, loss,

and insecurity. They are expected to provide support while also navigating systems that may be slow, fragmented, or unable to respond fully to children's needs.

The emotional demands of the role are connected to the nature of guardianship itself. Guardianship is not only procedural. It requires adults to accompany children through complex legal, social, educational, and protection processes while also creating conditions of trust and safety. Professionals may therefore experience a strong sense of personal and ethical responsibility. Their concern is not only whether a referral has been made or a procedure has been completed, but whether the child is genuinely protected, listened to, understood, and supported.

Several elements in the material suggest risks associated with compassion fatigue, moral distress, and secondary traumatic stress. Professionals may feel emotionally affected by children's stories, frustrated by institutional limitations, or powerless when systems fail to respond adequately. Moral distress appears particularly important. It emerges when professionals know what a child may need but cannot always secure that support because of structural barriers, lack of services, unclear responsibilities, or administrative delays.

This theme demonstrates that emotional burden is not a sign of professional weakness. It is a predictable consequence of working in a field where high responsibility, limited control, and exposure to trauma coexist. Recognising this emotional burden is therefore essential for designing sustainable child protection systems.

Theme 2: Peer Support, Belonging, and Collective Resilience

The Listening Circles consistently show that group-based reflection can reduce professional isolation. Participants appear to benefit from recognising that others face similar dilemmas, emotional reactions, uncertainties, and systemic frustrations. This recognition creates a sense of normalisation and shared professional experience.

The group itself emerges as a protective factor. Through the Listening Circles, participants were able to move from individualised stress toward shared reflection. They were not simply describing problems; they were developing a collective language for understanding those problems. This is important because professional isolation can intensify emotional burden. When difficult experiences remain private, professionals may interpret them as personal failure. When they are shared in a structured and respectful space, they can become part of collective learning.

Belonging is therefore one of the most important psychological outcomes of the Listening Circles. Participants were able to experience themselves as part of a wider community of practice rather than as isolated individuals managing complex cases alone. From a community-based and psychological perspective, this is highly significant. Belonging can operate as a buffer against burnout, emotional overload, and professional withdrawal.

The material also suggests a developmental movement within the reflective process. In some cases, participants initially focused on stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. Over time, the emphasis appeared to shift toward coping strategies, professional reflection, mutual support, and shared meaning-making. This movement is consistent with the function of reflective groups. Distress is not simply expressed; it is gradually processed and transformed into insight, professional language, and collective resilience.

The Listening Circles, therefore, demonstrate that peer support is not an optional add-on to professional practice. It is a mechanism through which professionals sustain their capacity to remain engaged, thoughtful, and emotionally available in demanding work with children.

Theme 3: Systemic Complexity and Fragmentation

A second major finding concerns the systemic complexity of guardianship and child protection work. Participants across all project countries repeatedly referred to challenges related to fragmented services, unclear roles, inconsistent information flows, administrative delays, lack of coordination, and insufficient communication between agencies.

This theme shows that many difficulties faced by guardians and professionals cannot be reduced to individual competence. Professionals may have commitment, knowledge, and motivation, but their work is shaped by the systems around them. When referral pathways are unclear, services are unavailable, communication is weak, or responsibilities are not clearly defined, professionals are placed in a difficult position. They are expected to protect children within systems that do not always provide the necessary conditions for effective protection.

The material highlights the importance of interagency coordination, shared protocols, reliable referral pathways, and clear communication between services. This is especially important in cases involving unaccompanied children, whose needs often cross multiple sectors. A child may simultaneously require legal support, accommodation, education, healthcare, psychosocial care, disability assessment, cultural mediation, and long-term planning. No single professional or service can respond adequately to this complexity alone.

Several reflections point to the need for better mapping of available services, clearer points of contact, improved continuity of care, and stronger cooperation between formal institutions and community-based actors. These issues are not only administrative. They affect children's access to rights, safety, wellbeing, and participation.

Systemic fragmentation also has emotional consequences for professionals. When systems do not function coherently, professionals may experience frustration, helplessness, or moral distress. They may feel responsible for outcomes that they cannot fully control. This creates a direct link between system quality and professional wellbeing.

The Listening Circles therefore reveal a central policy lesson: guardianship cannot function effectively as an isolated role. It requires an integrated child protection ecosystem with clear procedures, coordinated services, accessible referral mechanisms, and shared responsibility.

Theme 4: Rights-Based and Ethical Professional Identity

A strong cross-cutting theme in the Listening Circles is the development of a rights-based and ethical professional identity. Participants engaged with issues related to dignity, equality, participation, protection from violence, social inclusion, gender-based discrimination, sexual safety, and ethical responsibility.

This theme is important because it shows that the Listening Circles were not limited to practical problem-solving. They also functioned as spaces where professionals reflected on the values that should guide their work. In this sense, the Listening Circles contributed to professional identity formation.

The material suggests that child protection practice was understood not only as service provision but as a rights-based relationship. Children were framed as rights holders rather than passive recipients of care. This is particularly important in work with unaccompanied children, who may be exposed to multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities, including disability, displacement, family separation, legal insecurity, trauma, poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, and limited access to services.

The emphasis on participation is especially significant. The material suggests a movement beyond protection understood only as safety. Protection also includes empowerment, voice, agency, and meaningful involvement in decisions. Children should not only be protected from harm. They should also be listened to, informed, supported to express their views, and recognised as active subjects in their own lives.

This rights-based orientation is closely connected to the best interests principle. Professionals are required to consider safety, development, relationships, wellbeing, legal status, education, health, and the child's own views. The Listening Circles show that this is rarely simple. Best interests decision-making often involves uncertainty, competing priorities, incomplete information, and ethical tension. Reflective spaces are therefore important because they allow professionals to examine these dilemmas collectively rather than managing them alone.

The development of a rights-based professional culture is one of the important contributions of the Listening Circles. It strengthens the connection between everyday practice and the broader principles of child protection.

Theme 5: Trauma-Informed Understanding and Practice

Across the Listening Circles, trauma emerges as an increasingly important analytical lens. Participants reflected on the psychological and behavioural consequences of loss, displacement, violence, uncertainty, family separation, and traumatic experiences. Behavioural responses such as withdrawal, aggression, mistrust, hypervigilance, emotional numbness, regression, or difficulty engaging with services were understood as meaningful responses to adversity rather than simply as problematic behaviour.

This represents an important shift in professional interpretation. A trauma-informed perspective changes how professionals understand children's actions. Instead of asking only what is wrong with the child, professionals begin to ask what the child has experienced, what the behaviour may communicate, and what kind of response may restore safety and trust.

This approach reduces the risk of punitive, moralising, or pathologising responses. It supports more sensitive, stabilising, and relational forms of care. In the context of unaccompanied children, this is particularly important because trauma may be linked not only to past events but also to ongoing uncertainty, insecure status, separation from family, social isolation, and fear about the future.

The material also highlights the importance of safe, predictable, and supportive environments. Safety is not only physical. It is also emotional, relational, and procedural. Children need adults who can listen without judgement, respect boundaries, explain procedures clearly, maintain consistency, and respond to distress with sensitivity.

Narrative work also appears as a meaningful component of trauma-informed practice. Children's stories are not only sources of information. They are connected to identity, memory, loss, resilience, and belonging. Listening to children's narratives can help professionals understand the meaning of children's experiences and support more individualised forms of care.

The Listening Circles therefore reinforce the importance of trauma-informed guardianship. Guardians and child protection professionals need the ability to recognise trauma responses, avoid retraumatisation, support emotional regulation, and build relationships based on trust, predictability, and respect.

Theme 6: Professional Resilience, Self-Care, and Secondary Trauma

One of the most important developments across the material is the growing recognition that professionals themselves need protection and support. Themes such as psychological resilience, emotional regulation,

professional boundaries, burnout awareness, coping strategies, stress-cycle regulation, and secondary trauma became increasingly visible.

This is a critical finding. The effectiveness of child protection systems depends partly on the emotional sustainability of those providing care. Professionals who work continuously with trauma, uncertainty, loss, crisis, and institutional pressure may become emotionally depleted if they do not have structured opportunities for reflection, supervision, recovery, and support.

However, professional resilience should not be understood as an individual personality trait. The material suggests that resilience is relational and organisational. It depends on peer support, reflective spaces, clear boundaries, manageable responsibilities, access to guidance, supervision, and recognition of emotional labour.

This distinction is important. If resilience is treated only as an individual responsibility, professionals may be expected to cope alone with structurally difficult conditions. The Listening Circles point instead toward a systemic understanding of resilience. Professionals need supportive environments, not only personal coping strategies.

The theme of self-care should therefore be interpreted carefully. Self-care is important, but it is insufficient if systems remain fragmented, workloads are unmanageable, and professionals lack supervision or organisational support. Sustainable child protection requires both individual and collective forms of care.

The Listening Circles therefore suggest a key implication: supporting professionals is not secondary to supporting children. It is part of the same protection system. When professionals are supported, they are more able to offer stable, thoughtful, and child-centred care. When they are unsupported, emotionally overloaded, or isolated, the quality and continuity of care may be weakened.

Theme 7: The Limited Visibility of Disability and Developmental Needs

A significant and analytically important finding is the limited visibility of disability, developmental delays, and neurodevelopmental vulnerabilities within the Listening Circles. Although the wider project framework places emphasis on children with disabilities and developmental difficulties, this theme appears only weakly and inconsistently across the material.

This absence should not be treated as a minor gap. In qualitative research, silence can be as meaningful as explicit discussion. The limited visibility of disability may indicate several possible issues. Professionals may not always recognise developmental or neurodevelopmental needs. They may lack the language or tools to discuss them. Disability may be overshadowed by more visible concerns such as legal status, trauma, accommodation, violence, or social inclusion. It may also reflect wider systemic gaps in screening, referral, assessment, and specialised support.

This finding raises a deeper concern about the possible invisibility of disability within everyday child protection practice. Unaccompanied children with intellectual disabilities, developmental delays, psychosocial disabilities, neurodevelopmental conditions, communication difficulties, or trauma-related functional impairments may be at particular risk of being misunderstood or underserved.

The issue is especially complex because trauma and developmental needs may overlap. A child's difficulty with attention, communication, emotional regulation, learning, memory, trust, or social interaction may be interpreted only through a trauma lens, while underlying developmental or disability-related needs remain unidentified. Conversely, trauma-related responses may be misunderstood as behavioural or developmental problems without sufficient attention to the child's lived experience.

The Listening Circles therefore point to the need for stronger disability-inclusive practice and awareness raising. Disability inclusion should not be treated as a separate or specialised topic addressed only by disability services. It should be integrated into trauma-informed, rights-based, and child-centred guardianship practice.

This requires practical tools for early identification, adapted communication, reasonable accommodation, referral to specialised services, multidisciplinary assessment, and individualised planning. It also requires training that helps professionals recognise how disability, trauma, migration, language, culture, and institutional barriers interact in children's lives.

Cross-Cutting Interpretation

Taken together, the Listening Circles show that effective guardianship and child protection require more than training alone. They require a professional ecosystem that combines knowledge, emotional support, ethical clarity, systemic coordination, reflective practice, and disability-inclusive approaches.

The findings can be understood through three interconnected dimensions.

The first is the **relational-emotional dimension**. Professionals and guardians need to manage anxiety, responsibility, empathy, boundaries, and secondary exposure to trauma. Their ability to remain emotionally available to children depends on whether they themselves have access to support, reflection, and containment.

The second is the **systemic-institutional dimension**. Effective support for children depends on coordination, clear procedures, information-sharing, continuity of care, and cooperation between services. When systems are fragmented, both children and professionals are affected. Children may experience delays or gaps in care, while professionals may experience frustration and moral distress.

The third is the **ethical-rights-based dimension**. Practice must be guided by dignity, participation, non-discrimination, child protection principles, and the best interests of the child. These principles are not abstract. They shape how professionals listen to children, interpret their needs, support their agency, and advocate for their rights.

The value of the Listening Circles lies precisely in the fact that they bring these dimensions together. The challenges faced by professionals are not only emotional, not only technical, and not only institutional. They are integrated. Emotional burden is intensified by system fragmentation. System fragmentation is harder to manage without peer support. Rights-based practice is difficult to sustain without professional resilience. Trauma-informed care requires both personal capacity and organisational support. Disability inclusion requires both awareness and functioning referral systems.

The Listening Circles therefore offer a deeper understanding of guardianship as a relational, ethical, and system-dependent practice. They show that effective guardianship cannot be reduced to legal representation or case management. It requires supported professionals working within coordinated and inclusive systems.

Conclusions

The Listening Circles demonstrate that guardians and child protection professionals working with unaccompanied children operate within a complex field of emotional, ethical, and institutional demands. Their work involves far more than procedural responsibility. It requires relational sensitivity, cultural understanding, trauma-informed interpretation, rights-based judgement, and the ability to remain psychologically available in situations of uncertainty.

The most important finding is that structured reflective spaces are not optional. They are necessary components of sustainable child protection systems. Listening Circles can function as protective environments for professionals, spaces of shared learning, and mechanisms for developing collective resilience.

The analysis also shows that professional support must be understood systemically. Individual self-care is not enough if professionals continue to work in fragmented systems with unclear roles, weak communication, and limited access to specialised support. Resilience must therefore be built at three levels: individual, group, and organisational.

A further conclusion is that the Listening Circles helped develop a shared professional language. Participants were able to connect practical experience with concepts such as trauma, rights, participation, professional boundaries, emotional regulation, cultural mediation, ethical responsibility, and systemic coordination. This shared language is essential for improving consistency and quality in child protection practice.

At the same time, the limited visibility of disability and developmental needs remains a major concern. Future work should ensure that disability-inclusive guardianship is not treated as a separate or secondary issue, but as an integral part of child protection, trauma-informed care, rights-based practice, and professional training.

The Listening Circles also demonstrate that knowledge production in child protection does not only come from formal research or quantitative evaluation. Practice-based reflection can generate valuable evidence about what professionals need, where systems fail, and how support can be improved. In this sense, the Listening Circles should be understood as both a support mechanism and a knowledge-generation tool.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest the need to institutionalise reflective spaces for guardians and professionals working with unaccompanied children. These spaces should not be occasional, informal, or dependent only on individual initiative. They should be structured, facilitated, regular, and recognised as part of professional support and quality assurance.

Training should be complemented by supervision, peer support, and case-based reflection. Knowledge alone is not sufficient. Professionals need opportunities to process emotional burden, discuss complex cases, reflect on ethical dilemmas, and develop strategies for sustainable practice.

Organisations should recognise emotional labour as part of child protection work. This means creating mechanisms for supervision, peer consultation, team reflection, and early identification of burnout or secondary traumatic stress. Professional wellbeing should be treated as a condition for quality practice.

Systems should also strengthen coordination mechanisms between guardians, social services, reception structures, health services, mental health professionals, legal actors, cultural mediators, disability services, education providers, and community organisations. Fragmentation increases professional stress and weakens children's access to coherent support.

Disability and developmental needs should be integrated more explicitly into all future Listening Circles, training activities, supervision structures, and policy recommendations. This should include practical tools for identification, referral, communication, reasonable accommodation, and multidisciplinary planning.

Finally, Listening Circles should be linked to broader system learning. The insights generated through reflective spaces should inform training curricula, service mapping, referral protocols, supervision

standards, and policy development. In this way, individual and group reflection can contribute to wider system improvement.

Policy-Relevant Insights

The Listening Circles provide several important policy-relevant lessons.

First, guardianship systems should include structured reflective practice as part of professional support. Reflection is not only a therapeutic or supportive activity. It strengthens decision-making, ethical awareness, professional resilience, and quality of care.

Second, professional wellbeing should be recognised as a child protection issue. Systems that depend on emotionally overloaded and unsupported professionals are less likely to provide consistent and sensitive support to children.

Third, peer support and communities of practice should be developed as part of guardianship systems. These mechanisms reduce isolation, support shared learning, and contribute to collective resilience.

Fourth, child protection systems should address fragmentation through clearer referral pathways, stronger interagency cooperation, and better communication between services. Supporting guardians requires supporting the systems around them.

Fifth, disability inclusion must become more visible within guardianship and child protection practice. Policies should promote early identification, accessible communication, specialised referral pathways, and integration of disability into trauma-informed and rights-based approaches.

Sixth, the emotional and ethical complexity of guardianship should be reflected in training, supervision, and quality standards. Guardianship should not be treated as a purely administrative role. It is a specialised child protection function requiring competence, reflection, and institutional support.

Final Synthesis

The Listening Circles provide strong qualitative evidence that child protection work with unaccompanied children is relationally demanding, ethically complex, emotionally intense, and systemically dependent. Guardians and professionals need knowledge and skills, but they also need belonging, reflection, emotional containment, institutional clarity, and collective resilience.

The central conclusion is that protecting unaccompanied children requires protecting the professional and relational systems around them. Listening Circles can contribute to this by transforming individual experience into shared understanding, professional identity, and collective capacity for care.

Their value lies in making visible the hidden emotional, ethical, and systemic dimensions of child protection practice. They reveal what professionals need, where systems create barriers, how resilience is built, and which issues remain insufficiently visible. Among these, the limited visibility of disability and developmental needs requires particular attention.

In this sense, the Listening Circles should be understood not only as a support activity but as a practice-based knowledge mechanism. They provide evidence that effective guardianship depends on supported professionals, reflective communities, coordinated systems, trauma-informed understanding, rights-based judgement, and disability-inclusive practice.

The overall lesson is clear: guardianship systems cannot be strengthened only through procedures or training materials. They must also create spaces where professionals can reflect, connect, process emotional burden, develop shared language, and transform experience into better practice. This is

essential for building more resilient, inclusive, and child-centred protection systems for unaccompanied children.

4. Key Lessons from GUIDE

4.1 Guardians Need Both Competence and Support

One of the most important lessons emerging from the GUIDE project is that effective guardianship depends on both professional competence and professional support. The evaluation findings from the training activities showed that guardians and child protection professionals can significantly strengthen their knowledge, skills, and confidence through structured learning opportunities. Participants reported improvements in areas such as child rights, best interests decision-making, communication with children, safeguarding, referral pathways, disability inclusion, and interagency cooperation.

However, the findings from the Listening Circles demonstrated that knowledge alone is not enough. Guardians often work in emotionally demanding and complex situations. They support children who may have experienced displacement, family separation, trauma, violence, uncertainty, and social exclusion. In these circumstances, professional competence must be accompanied by opportunities for reflection, peer support, and ongoing learning.

The GUIDE experience suggests that training and reflective practice should not be viewed as separate activities. They are complementary elements of a strong guardianship system. Training helps professionals develop the knowledge and skills they need, while reflective spaces help them apply these competencies in practice, manage challenges, and maintain their wellbeing over time.

4.2 Supporting Professionals is Part of Supporting Children

A second key lesson concerns the relationship between professional wellbeing and child protection outcomes. The Listening Circles revealed that guardians and child protection professionals often carry a significant emotional burden. Participants reflected on responsibility, uncertainty, concern for children's futures, and the challenges of working within complex and sometimes fragmented systems.

These findings highlight an important reality: professionals cannot consistently provide high-quality support to children if they themselves remain isolated, emotionally overloaded, or unsupported. Child protection systems often focus on the needs of children, which is both necessary and appropriate. However, the GUIDE findings demonstrate that the wellbeing of professionals should also be recognised as a child protection issue.

Supporting professionals does not mean reducing attention to children. On the contrary, it strengthens the quality of care children receive. When guardians have access to peer support, reflective spaces, supervision, and opportunities for professional development, they are better able to remain engaged, thoughtful, and responsive to children's needs.

The findings therefore suggest that investment in professional support is also an investment in better outcomes for children.

4.3 Guardianship as a Relational, Rights-Based and System-Dependent Practice

The GUIDE project also highlights the multidimensional nature of guardianship. Effective guardianship cannot be understood simply as a legal or administrative responsibility. Instead, it is a relational, rights-based, and system-dependent practice.

At the relational level, guardians are required to build trust, communicate effectively, listen to children, and support their participation in decisions that affect their lives. Many unaccompanied children face uncertainty, loss, and complex life situations. The quality of the relationship between the child and the guardian can therefore play a crucial role in promoting safety, wellbeing, and inclusion.

At the rights-based level, guardianship is guided by principles such as the best interests of the child, non-discrimination, participation, dignity, and protection from harm. The findings show that guardians are not only responsible for ensuring access to services but also for advocating for children's rights and helping children navigate complex systems.

At the same time, guardianship is highly dependent on the wider protection system. Even highly skilled and committed professionals may struggle when services are fragmented, referral pathways are unclear, or coordination between agencies is weak. Effective guardianship therefore requires not only competent professionals but also responsive and coordinated systems.

The GUIDE findings demonstrate that strengthening guardianship means strengthening both people and systems.

4.4 Disability Inclusion Remains an Unfinished Agenda

A particularly important finding concerns the limited visibility of disability and developmental needs within everyday guardianship practice. Although children with disabilities and children with developmental difficulties were a central focus of the GUIDE project, these issues appeared less frequently than expected within the Listening Circles and other qualitative findings.

This observation should not be interpreted as evidence that disability is unimportant. Rather, it may suggest that disability and developmental needs remain insufficiently recognised within child protection systems. Professionals may face challenges in identifying and acknowledging these needs, discussing them, or accessing specialised support services. In some cases, disability-related needs may be overshadowed by more visible concerns such as legal status, accommodation, trauma, or immediate protection risks.

The findings indicate that disability inclusion requires greater attention in training, supervision, service mapping, referral pathways, and policy development. Disability should not be treated as a specialised topic relevant only to certain professionals. Instead, it should be integrated into all aspects of guardianship and child protection practice.

The GUIDE project has contributed to raising awareness of this issue, but the findings suggest that further work is needed. Building truly inclusive guardianship systems will require stronger disability-sensitive approaches, better access to specialised services, improved identification mechanisms, and greater integration of disability considerations into everyday child protection practice.

Overall, the GUIDE experience shows that disability inclusion remains an important priority for future policy and practice development at both national and European levels.

5. Towards More Resilient and Inclusive Guardianship Systems

The findings of the GUIDE project provide important insights into how guardianship systems can be strengthened to better support unaccompanied children across Europe. Drawing on evidence from both the training programme and the Listening Circles, the project demonstrates that effective guardianship depends on much more than legal responsibility or administrative procedures. It requires competent professionals, supportive environments, coordinated services, and systems that place children's rights and wellbeing at the centre of decision-making.

A central lesson emerging from the project is that guardians need both competence and support. The training activities showed that guardians and child protection professionals can strengthen their knowledge, skills, and confidence through structured learning opportunities. At the same time, the Listening Circles revealed that professional competence alone is insufficient when professionals face emotional burden, ethical dilemmas, uncertainty, and fragmented service systems. Knowledge must therefore be accompanied by opportunities for reflection, peer support, and continuous professional development.

The findings also demonstrate that supporting professionals should be understood as part of supporting children. Guardians work in highly demanding environments and are often exposed to complex situations involving trauma, displacement, family separation, legal uncertainty, and social vulnerability. When professionals are isolated, emotionally overloaded, or unsupported, their capacity to provide stable and consistent support may be affected. Strengthening child protection therefore requires investment not only in services for children but also in the wellbeing, resilience, and professional sustainability of those responsible for protecting them.

Another important conclusion concerns the nature of guardianship itself. The GUIDE findings reinforce the understanding of guardianship as a relational, rights-based, and system-dependent practice. Effective guardianship requires the ability to build trusting relationships with children, support meaningful participation, promote children's rights, and navigate complex protection systems. At the same time, even highly competent guardians cannot operate effectively within fragmented systems characterised by unclear responsibilities, weak referral mechanisms, or limited interagency cooperation. Strengthening guardianship therefore requires strengthening both individual capacities and institutional structures.

The project also highlights the importance of reflective practice as a component of professional quality. The Listening Circles demonstrated that structured opportunities for reflection can reduce professional isolation, strengthen peer support, promote collective learning, and contribute to resilience. Reflective spaces should therefore not be viewed as optional activities. They should be recognised as an integral component of effective guardianship systems and embedded within professional support structures.

A further lesson concerns disability inclusion. While the project placed significant emphasis on children with disabilities and developmental difficulties, the findings suggest that disability remains insufficiently visible within everyday guardianship practice. This may reflect wider challenges related to identification, referral, specialised support, and professional confidence in addressing disability-related needs. Future

efforts should therefore ensure that disability inclusion is fully integrated into training programmes, referral systems, supervision structures, and child protection policies. Disability-inclusive guardianship should not be treated as a specialised issue but as a core dimension of rights-based child protection.

The findings also point to the need for stronger coordination across child protection systems. Guardians regularly operate at the intersection of multiple sectors, including social services, health care, mental health support, education, migration services, legal assistance, disability services, and community organisations. Effective protection depends on the ability of these systems to work together. Clear referral pathways, shared protocols, accessible services, and effective communication between stakeholders are essential conditions for ensuring that children receive timely and appropriate support.

Looking ahead, the GUIDE project suggests that future guardianship policies should move beyond a narrow focus on procedural responsibilities and recognise guardianship as a specialised child protection function. Guardians require not only legal knowledge but also communication skills, trauma-informed understanding, cultural sensitivity, professional judgement, and access to ongoing support. Equally important, they need systems that enable them to perform their role effectively.

Ultimately, the evidence generated through GUIDE points toward a broader vision of guardianship. Effective guardianship is not solely the responsibility of individual professionals. It is the outcome of coordinated systems, supportive organisations, informed policies, and communities of practice that enable professionals to protect, advocate for, and support children in meaningful ways.

The overall message of the project is clear: strengthening guardianship systems requires investment in both people and systems. Competent professionals, reflective practice, coordinated services, rights-based approaches, and disability-inclusive support are all necessary components of resilient and effective guardianship. By bringing these elements together, child protection systems can become better equipped to respond to the complex needs of unaccompanied children and to uphold their rights, wellbeing, participation, and inclusion.