From Statement to Practice: The Developing International Implementation of the FICE Vienna Statement on Appropriate and Quality Alternative Care

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WORKING DRAFT FOR REVIEW

Background and approach

In September 2025, the FICE International Federal Council in Vienna approved the FICE International Statement on Promoting Appropriate and Quality Alternative Care Options for Children and Youth. The Statement emerged from several years of work within FICE International's Quality in Care Working Group, including a discussion paper presented at the FICE35 Congress in Split in 2024, subsequent debate, and further consultation with FICE members (FICE International, 2025, pp. 24-25).

The Statement itself starts from an important premise: no single model of care can meet the diverse circumstances and needs of children, young people, and families throughout the world. FICE therefore advocates high-quality care both in family-based and group-care settings, with the best interests and particular needs of the individual child as the determining consideration (FICE International, 2025, p. 26).

Its eleven principles address, among other themes, meaningful child participation, stable and developmentally supportive caregiving relationships, individualised care, family strengthening, diversity of care options, the quality of care rather than the setting alone, family and community connections, robust gatekeeping, purposeful duration of placements, preparation for autonomy, and the importance of a trained, supported and sustainable workforce (FICE International, 2025, pp. 26-28).

The published Statement was accompanied by a preamble and proposed next steps, written by Dr James Anglin, that made clear the adoption in Vienna was not intended to be the end of the process. The Statement was conceived as a "living tool", capable of supporting reform, advocacy, capacity-building and the development of national standards, while being adapted to different legal, cultural and institutional contexts (FICE International, 2025, p. 28).

During 2026, this question of how to implement the Statement began to be explored in a number of very different settings. These included the World Child and Youth Care Conference in St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, an international foster care conference in Porto, a seminar at the historic University of Coimbra, national discussions in South Africa, and most recently the FICE International Federal Council in Sofia. Taken together, these experiences suggest that implementation is not a single event or a linear process, but rather a dynamic process of presentation, discussion, translation, contextualisation, testing, reflection and the development of practical tools.

St John's: opening the international dialogue

An important early opportunity to take the Statement into a wider professional space came at the World Child and Youth Care Conference in St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, in June 2026. The conference theme, Healing Through Connection, provided an appropriate context in which to discuss quality care, relationships and the place of different forms of alternative care.

FICE International participated actively in the conference, distributing the Vienna Statement and using two sessions as well as informal encounters to present its underlying thinking. One of the strongest examples of this was the contribution of Dr Kiran Modi, from Udayan Care in India. Her presentation, From Global Principles to Local Realities: India's Integrated Approach to Alternative Care, engaged directly with the Vienna Statement from the perspective of a country of enormous geographical, cultural and social diversity.

Modi situated the Statement within India's own historical development of care. She emphasised India's longstanding traditions of kinship, family and community-based care, while also acknowledging the legacy of institutional models and the present movement towards deinstitutionalisation. Her central argument was that family-based care should be prioritised, but that reform must remain grounded in present realities and the actual availability, safety and preparedness of family and community alternatives (Modi, 2026).

This led to an important distinction. For India, she argued, the question is not simply whether residential care should exist, but what kind of residential care is appropriate, for whom, and for how long. In Udayan Care's own experience, residential care is increasingly understood as small-scale, time-bound and integrated within a broader continuum, functioning as a place of healing, stabilisation and preparation rather than as a permanent destination (Modi, 2026).

Her contribution also demonstrated how several principles of the Vienna Statement can be interpreted within a national context: child participation, individualised care, family strengthening, a continuum of care options, reintegration, maintenance of family relationships and preparation for independent living (Modi, 2026).

Perhaps most significantly, Modi cautioned against what she termed reactionary reform. Deinstitutionalisation without adequate investment in families and communities can move children from visible systems of care into less visible situations of neglect, exploitation or homelessness (Modi, 2026).

Her conclusion closely reflected one of the central intentions of the Vienna Statement. The essential question is not which model should win an ideological debate, but what an individual child or young person needs at a particular moment in order to grow, heal and thrive (Modi, 2026).

This discussion in St John's showed that the Statement could create space for different countries to examine common principles without requiring identical systems or identical solutions. It also reinforced the value of international Child and Youth Care networks as spaces in which principles can be challenged, interpreted, and enriched through practice experience.

Portugal: bridge-building in Porto and contextualisation in Coimbra

The 13th International Conference of the Foster Care Research Network - (Re)thinking Foster Care Emerging Challenges and Systemic Responses at the Polytechnic University of Porto in Portugal in September 2026 was an international conference in which foster care research and practice were naturally the predominant themes, and as such the Vienna Statement in this environment required some care.

FICE strongly supports the development of high-quality foster care. At the same time, the Vienna Statement explicitly rejects the idea that all children and all situations can be adequately served by one care model. It identifies the need for a diversity of responses, including kinship care, foster care, supported independent living, residential or small-group care, specialised therapeutic placements and protective shelters for mothers and their children, amongst other possibilities (FICE International, 2025, p. 27).

The intention of the author's participation in Porto was therefore specifically not to defend residential care against foster care, but to build bridges. The presentation emphasised that support for foster care and recognition of a continuing role for appropriate residential care are not contradictory positions. Both can form part of a child-centred continuum in which placement decisions respond to individual needs rather than to predetermined models.

The response in Porto was encouraging. The Statement appeared to be well received, including among researchers and practitioners whose principal professional field was foster care. This was important in itself. International implementation will depend partly upon FICE's ability to enter professional spaces where there may be differing assumptions about alternative care and to find common ground around quality, children's rights and individual need.

Continuing in Portugal, the same presentation was delivered in Portuguese at the seminar, “Quality of Alternative Care: International Perspectives and Challenges for the Promotion of the Rights of Children and Young People in Care,” at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Coimbra. It was organised as an initiative of the Master’s Programme in Forensic Clinical Psychology, in partnership with FICE International, with Dr Laura Santos playing a leading role in its organisation. This gave the Coimbra event a more explicitly FICE-oriented character than Porto. It created space not only to present the Vienna Statement, but also to introduce FICE International more broadly, to situate its quality agenda within the Portuguese context, and to encourage discussion about the relevance of its principles for alternative care and the rights of children and young people in Portugal.

A valuable contribution came from Judge Paulo Guerra of the Coimbra Court of Appeal. Guerra stated that he intended to draw a parallel between the child-care system described by the author from Brazilian practice and the Portuguese system (Guerra, 2026); whilst explicitly referring to the FICE International Quality Statement, he asked whether Portugal was genuinely prepared to guarantee not merely children's protection and survival, but their future and full dignity (Guerra, 2026).

One of his observations is particularly relevant to the implementation discussion. He argued that the quality of an alternative care response should not be measured by the model itself, but by its capacity to provide emotional stability, meaningful relationships, and structured, safe environments (Guerra, 2026). He also linked the Statement directly to children's participation, describing participation in decisions shaping their lives as a non-negotiable right (Guerra, 2026).

The Coimbra discussion suggested another form of implementation which does not begin through formal policy adoption of the international statement; rather it creates a framework through which professionals examine their own systems, assumptions and practices. In this sense, The Vienna Statement became a catalyst for local reflection.

South Africa: from international principles to national advocacy

Dialogue around appropriate and quality alternative care had already been developing through the National Association of Child and Youth Care Workers (NACCW). On the 26th of February 2026, James Anglin contributed online to an NACCW event with a presentation entitled Advancing

the Appropriate and Quality Alternative Care Options for Children and Youth, helping to connect the emerging international FICE discussion with the South African context (Anglin, 2026).

This engagement was discussed at the FICE Federal Council in Sofia, delivered online during the session reintroducing the Vienna Statement by Donald Nghonyama of FICE South Africa. He described South Africa's long transition away from large residential institutions towards stronger family, community-based and alternative-care responses. At the same time, he stressed that deinstitutionalisation must not simply mean closing institutions. It must involve the creation and strengthening of alternatives that are safe, nurturing, culturally responsive and able to meet children's developmental needs (Nghonyama, 2026).

His contribution strongly reinforced the Statement's individualised approach. Appropriate care cannot be a one-size-fits-all response. Some children need family strengthening and prevention services; others may require kinship care or foster care; still others may need temporary residential care or specialised therapeutic support. The form of care should follow the child's needs rather than simply the service that happens to be available (Nghonyama, 2026).

The South African experience is particularly valuable because discussion has already generated concrete organisational and advocacy responses. NACCW organised webinars with the Child and Youth Care sector, established a task team of national and international experts and used FICE's work on appropriate quality care to assist in developing a South African position paper. This position paper was subsequently presented to the Minister of Social Development and endorsed by the Child and Youth Care sector (Nghonyama, 2026).

The position does not argue that every child should receive residential care. Instead, it maintains that Child and Youth Care Centres should remain one component of a broader continuum where a safe, structured, and therapeutic residential environment is in the best interests of a particular child (Nghonyama, 2026). Nghonyama also made the observation about implementation: good policy matters, but implementation is what children experience (Nghonyama, 2026).

Sofia: from dissemination towards implementation

In the further sessions of the FICE International Federal Council in Sofia in September 2026, the conversation continued. During the Federal Council, more than thirty participants and members took part in a World Cafe process focused on implementation. The results were subsequently brought together by the Quality in Care Strategic Working Group.

The discussion identified a wide range of implementation and capacity-building needs for practitioners, organisations and care systems seeking to apply the Statement in practice. These included better knowledge of children's rights and policy frameworks; safeguarding and quality standards; relational Child and Youth Care practice; trauma-informed care; understanding adolescent development; training and support for caregivers, supervisors, social workers and other practitioners; professional ethics; accessible resources; inclusion of families of origin; and reflective learning from experience (FICE International Quality in Care Strategic Working Group, 2026).

Participants also identified a number of resources, approaches and enabling conditions considered important for implementation, including multilingual and practice-oriented materials, digital communication, networking between local and international stakeholders, participation of children and young people, research, exchange of best practice, conferences, advocacy and funding (FICE International Quality in Care Strategic Working Group, 2026). The working-group summary identified the next stage explicitly as the development of an Action Plan and self-assessment process (FICE International Quality in Care Strategic Working Group, 2026).

Two experimental tools were tested in Sofia: prototype Quality in Care games, one developed as a board game and another as a card game. Both were received positively by participants. Their significance lies less in the games themselves than in what they represent. A document can be read once and placed on a shelf. A participatory tool can invite teams to discuss, disagree, reflect on practice, consider hypothetical situations and explore how abstract principles apply to everyday decisions. Both games remain in prototype form, but they point towards a more interactive approach to implementation, and may require various forms of each game to include their application in both highly experienced and technical groups, whilst also offering versions for diverse groups such as care-providers, foster parents, care-experienced youth, management, policy makers, amongst others.

A further example of the Statement functioning as a living and sometimes provocative framework emerged from discussions in Sofia around Principle 7. This principle calls for every effort to preserve, restore or strengthen a child's connection with their family of origin or extended family, and states that "reintegration should be a key focus of all care interventions." Coenraad de Beer, Strategy, Research and Development Advisor at SOS Children's Villages International, raised concern that this wording could be read too rigidly in situations where reintegration may not be safe, appropriate or consistent with the relationships that are most important to the child or young person. Drawing on recent practice experience, he suggested that *belonging* might offer a broader and more child-centred organising principle: one that leaves space for reintegration where this is right for the child, while also recognising the importance of current relationships, community, identity and the connections the child wishes to maintain. The discussion did not lead to any immediate proposal to reopen the Statement, but it illustrates that the quality statement need not be regarded as perfect or final in order to be useful. Its value also lies in provoking reflection, exposing tensions in practice and generating the kinds of professional debates through which its principles can be better understood and, over time, strengthened.

Reflection: what are we learning about implementation?

These experiences suggest that implementation of an international quality statement should not be understood as straightforward replication.

India, Portugal, Brazil, Bulgaria, Austria, Canada and South Africa have different histories, legislation, resources, cultures and systems of care. The Vienna Statement explicitly recognises this diversity. Its strength may therefore lie not in prescribing identical arrangements but in providing a common framework of principles through which systems can examine whether the care available to a particular child is appropriate and of sufficient quality.

The quality statement has clear concerns about the continued danger of binary thinking. Much international discussion of alternative care has been framed as family care versus residential care. The experiences described here repeatedly challenge that simplification.

Kiran Modi's contribution from India, the Porto dialogue within a predominantly foster-care environment, Paulo Guerra's reflections in Portugal, Coenraad de Beer's reflections, and Donald Nghonyama's South African perspective all return, in different ways, to the same central questions: what is important for the child or young person? What is the best interest of the child?

This does not weaken the commitment to family strengthening, prevention, reintegration or the expansion of family-based alternatives. On the contrary, these remain fundamental. It recognises that children have different needs at different stages of their lives, and that the quality, purpose and relational character of care must be considered alongside its organisational form.

The international statement principles become more useful when people are encouraged to engage with them rather than simply agree with them. Paulo Guerra did not merely repeat the

Vienna principles. He used them as a starting point for a Portuguese reflection. Kiran Modi interpreted them against India's scale, traditions and current reforms. NACCW in South Africa moved from discussion towards webinars, a task team, sectoral positioning and engagement with government.

The implementation requires practical methods. Publication, translation and conference presentations remain necessary, but they are not an end in themselves. The Sofia discussions point towards training, accessible multilingual resources, reflective practice, research, advocacy, self-assessment and interactive learning tools.

The process therefore remains unfinished - and should remain dynamic.

Conclusion

The Vienna Statement was approved in September 2025, but its meaning will ultimately be determined by what happens after its approval.

During its first year, it has travelled into different professional and national environments. It has entered international Child and Youth Care discussions in Canada, a foster-care research community in Porto, a Portuguese professional and academic debate in Coimbra, national advocacy processes in South Africa, and implementation planning within FICE International in Sofia.

The purpose of the Statement is to create a shared commitment to ensuring that decisions about care begin with the child and their rights, relationships, identity, development, history, family and aspirations.

The next challenge for FICE International and its partners is therefore to continue moving from statement to practice - developing the training, tools, partnerships, reflection and evidence needed to ensure that the principles agreed in Vienna become visible in the everyday experience of children and young people.

The test of implementation will not be how often the Vienna Statement is cited. It will be whether children experience better care because of it.

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Note: Conference presentations and internal working documents are unpublished unless otherwise indicated. The Canada, Porto and Coimbra event descriptions also draw on the author's first-hand participation and contemporaneous FICE reporting.