Opening Statement – Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

Chair, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. My name is Anne Clarke, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Offaly Domestic Violence Support Service, a frontline organisation supporting victims and survivors of domestic abuse across Offaly, alongside an ethnic minority domestic abuse project operating throughout the Midlands region.

Every day, our service works with victims and survivors, children and families living with the realities of domestic abuse and ongoing risk often long after a relationship has ended. Our contribution today is grounded not in theory, but in lived experience and in the practical challenges victims face when engaging with statutory systems.

We welcome the overall direction of the **General Scheme of the Criminal Law** (Sexual Offences, Domestic Violence and International Instruments) **Bill 2025.** Taken as a whole, the Bill represents an important step forward in strengthening Ireland's response to domestic and sexual violence, enhancing accountability for perpetrators, improving child safeguarding, and aligning our law with EU directives and the Istanbul Convention. We particularly welcome the Bill's emphasis on prevention, protection, and prosecution as interconnected pillars, rather than standalone responses.

I want to focus briefly on two provisions of particular importance.

The first is the proposed **Domestic Violence Register of Judgments**. We recognise the potential of this measure to enhance transparency, accountability, and prevention, particularly where perpetrators conceal a history of violence from new partners. However, this Register must be implemented with extreme care. Victim consent must be genuinely informed and supported by specialist domestic abuse services, including safety planning for both the previous victim who consents to publication and for any person making enquiries to the Register. Risk assessments must be mandatory, and publication must never inadvertently expose victims or children to further harm, coercion, or retaliation. If implemented carefully, this measure could enhance safety; without safeguards, it carries real risk.

The second provision is the statutory footing for **Operation Encompass**, allowing Gardaí to notify schools when a child has been impacted by a domestic violence incident. We strongly support this initiative. Children living with domestic abuse often arrive at school carrying trauma that goes unseen.

However, this will only work safely if teachers are properly trained and supported. Domestic abuse is not a simple disclosure issue; it is a risk issue. Where there are multiple children from the same family in a school, or where an abusive parent has access to the school community, even well-intentioned actions can unintentionally increase danger. For Operation Encompass to succeed, it must be accompanied by mandatory, trauma-informed training, clear protocols on information sharing, designated school leads, and strong links to local specialist domestic violence services. Without these safeguards, the risk of unintended harm is very real.

Finally, we emphasise that legislation alone is not enough. For this Bill to deliver real change, it must be accompanied by sustained investment in frontline services, trauma-informed training across the justice and education systems, and strong interagency collaboration. We appreciate the Committee's attention to this critical legislation and thank you for listening to the voices of those working closest to its impact.

Thank you.

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