AlcoholAction Ireland

Independent Advocate Reducing Alcohol Harm

Pre-legislative scrutiny of General Scheme of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences, Domestic Violence and International Instruments) Bill 2025

Alcohol Action Ireland/Silent Voices appearance at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

20 January 2026

Why Operation Encompass is needed in Ireland

Opening statement

Alcohol Action Ireland is the national independent advocate for reducing alcohol harm. We very much appreciate the opportunity to engage with the Committee today. I am the CEO of AAI and my colleague, Carol Fawsitt, Solicitor, is a former chair of AAI and the co-founder of our initiative, Silent Voices, which seeks to raise awareness of issues around the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) of parental problem alcohol use (PPAU) and to put forward policy measures to reduce that childhood harm. Ms Fawsitt also speaks from the lived experience.

This traumatic experience is also a well-known gateway to other ACES such as domestic and sexual violence. These ACES can profoundly impact the child's development often carrying a life-long legacy with a significant body of research pointing to issues such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance use, relationship difficulties as well as impacts on educational attainment, development and more.

However, there is now growing evidence indicating the importance of early intervention in mitigating against this legacy. A particularly important aspect in reducing the harm from ACEs is ensuring the child is on the radar of at least one adult with knowledge of the situation.

We very much welcome the proposed legislation under discussion today in relation to Head 6: Insertion of new section 58 in the Domestic Violence Act 2018. This provides the statutory basis to allow for the introduction of an early intervention support mechanism for children impacted by domestic violence.

Since early 2020 Silent Voices has been advocating for the introduction of a programme, Operation Encompass, which was established in England and Wales in 2010 and more recently in Northern Ireland since 2023.

This programme ensures that if police attend a family home because of domestic violence that by the following morning they will have informed the child's school before commencement of the school day so that the child can be offered immediate support on going into school. At the very least this programme ensures that the child/young person is on the radar of at least one adult outside the home and provided with support. The proposed legislation would allow for this programme to be introduced in Ireland. Children spend most of their time in school and so this is the obvious place for such a programme.

Domestic violence is unfortunately only too common here with research from Women's Aid indicating that one in four women who have been in a relationship have been abused by a current or former partner.

European data demonstrates that three quarters of women who have been victims of domestic violence indicate that children living with them were aware of the violence. UK research suggests that one in five children have experienced domestic violence.

Experiencing domestic violence as a child is child abuse, a child protection issue, and a child welfare issue. Unfortunately, in Ireland, children are generally the unseen victims of domestic abuse, even though they are victims in their own right. We welcome that the Dept of Justice's third strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence now recognises this impact and has committed to the introduction of Operation Encompass in schools. This position is strongly supported by multiple children's groups including, Barnados, the Children's Ombudsman, the Children Rights Alliance and the ISPCC as well as many domestic violence bodies.

When OE was fully introduced in Northern Ireland over 23,000 referrals were made in its first year of operation, which gives an indication of the scale of the issue.

The UK programme has provided considerable support for schools participating in the programme with over 28,000 education personnel availing of free online training. The programme's originators have been highly supportive of an Irish version of the programme.

Having Operation Encompass operating in Ireland would go a long way to addressing the substantial harm caused to children living with domestic abuse during these vital developmental stages of their lives. Their lives and futures must matter. Early intervention is key and getting these at-risk children on the radar of a responsible adult is the first action required to mitigate this harm.

We warmly welcome the proposed legislation and happy to take any questions from the Committee.