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 Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

Why Operation Encompass is needed in Ireland

Summary

1. **Who we are**

Alcohol Action Ireland (AAI) is the independent advocate for reducing alcohol harm. It has an initiative, Silent Voices, founded in 2019 and launched by its first patron, Fergal Keane. Silent Voices aims to:

(i) Raise awareness of issues arising from the traumatic Adverse Childhood Experience of parental problem alcohol use (PPAU) and

(ii) Put forward policy measures to address these.

Silent Voices is informed by detailed national and international research as well as by the lived experience of its founders and contributors.

Our comments on the General Scheme of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences, Domestic Violence and International Instruments) Bill 2025 are confined to Head 6: Insertion of new section 58 in the Domestic Violence Act 2018 which provides the statutory basis to allow for the introduction of an early intervention support mechanism for children impacted by domestic violence.

2. **Domestic Violence and Parental Problem Alcohol Use**

Domestic violence is unfortunately only too common in Ireland 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.[1]

National and international evidence demonstrates that alcohol is frequently a component of domestic violence. Studies from Australia found that alcohol is involved in about 30-40% of both intimate partner and family violence.[2] Similarly, national research on domestic abuse in intimate partner relationships found that alcohol was a trigger for abusive behaviour in 34% of cases. [3] In addition, past research found that alcohol was a factor in up to 70% of cases of domestic violence against women. [4]

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights survey on violence against women found that 73 % of women who have been victims of violent incidents by their previous or current partner indicate that children living with them were aware of the violence.[5]

The exposure of children to two significant Adverse Childhood Experiences, domestic violence and parental problem alcohol use will have major impacts on children's lives and development.

3. Children – the unseen victims of 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 with the experience impacting on their development. Parental problem alcohol use (PPAU) is widely recognised not only as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) but also as a gateway to multiple other ACEs such as domestic violence.[6] This trauma can have a life-long legacy with a significant body of research pointing to impacts such as higher levels of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance use, relationship difficulties as well as impacts on educational attainment, development and more. [7]

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.[8]

4. Operation Encompass

In May 2020, AAI/Silent Voices began engaging with the State, advocating for the introduction of an early intervention programme - Operation Encompass. This was done firstly through a submission and meeting with the then CEO of Tusla, Bernard Gloster, and was followed by multiple meetings with senior government officials across the Departments of Children, Education, and Justice.

This programme would facilitate an information sharing partnership between Gardaí and schools, enabling schools and teachers to offer immediate intervention and support for children and young people experiencing domestic abuse. Information would be shared by Gardaí with a school's designated officer prior to the start of the next school day, after the Gardaí had attended a domestic incident. This would ensure early appropriate assistance and care is given, depending on the needs and wishes of the child.

The programme has been in place across England and Wales since 2010 and was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2023. In its first year in existence in Northern Ireland, 23,000 referrals were made under it.[9]

Key Facts of Operation Encompass in 2023/24 (England and Wales):[10] [11]

- 2,000 notifications a day in England and Wales alone, with an average notification including two children
- 4,000 children a day in England and Wales alone receiving support from their school
- Over 28,333 staff in schools and education settings including early years' settings, and other professionals, have accessed Operation Encompass free online National Key Adult training
- Bespoke briefings to over 4,000 people, including:
    - Ministry of Defence and Tri Services
    - Police Force Officers.
    - Small Islands Police Forces: Isle of Man, Guernsey, Jersey and Gibraltar.
    - Strategic Safeguarding Leads in LSCB.
    - Educational and Clinical Psychologists.
    - Professionals working in the safeguarding and social care field.
    - Head Teachers
    - School Safeguarding Leads
    - Governors
    - Early Years Settings
    - Childminders
    - Frontline Officers
    - Strategic Policing Teams
    - Yorkshire and Humber Regional Organised Crime Unit.
    - Bespoke face to face briefings were held with police officers in both Merseyside Police (5 days of presentations) and Greater Manchester Police (3 days of presentations).

Key Facts of Operation Encompass in 2023/24 (Northern Ireland):[12]

- 1,162 schools, of all types, are part of Operation Encompass.
- All 11 policing districts are involved.
- All Further Education colleges are part of the scheme.
- Up to January 2024, approximately 18,000 Operation Encompass notifications about individual children and young people were made by the PSNI.
- In its first year in existence 23,000 referrals were made.

  In Ireland, we know that one in three children are living with a parent who regularly binge drinks or is dependent on alcohol.[13] We also know that in many incidents, alcohol use is the catalyst to significant domestic disruption and abuse.

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.

We warmly welcome the proposed legislation which would allow for such critical harm reducing data sharing, which is in the interests of our youngest citizens.

Additional Background Information

5. Parental Problem Alcohol Use

According to research from the Health Research Board, one third of children in Ireland have at least one parent who regularly binge drinks or is dependent on alcohol.[14] Harmful alcohol use by a parent or caregiver has been shown to have a range of detrimental consequences for children, including negative health, educational, and social outcomes.[15]

The seriousness of this is compounded due to the close connection between alcohol and crime and violence. With such high rates of hazardous and binge drinking it is likely that hundreds of thousands of children are living in homes with alcohol fuelled violence. [16]

6. Alcohol and DSGBV

Alcohol Action Ireland is clear – the starting point for any conversation regarding alcohol and Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV) is to state unequivocally that alcohol is not, and never will be, an excuse or explanation for DSGBV.

Many people consume alcohol and do not perpetrate violence against their partner or children, and not all who perpetrate domestic violence use alcohol.

Unfortunately, what we do know is that alcohol acts as a commercial accelerant of violence and research demonstrates that, in incidences of DSGBV, it appears the role of alcohol is one of a facilitative nature, a contributing factor.[17] We also know that parental problem alcohol use is a well-known gateway to other Adverse Childhood Experiences including domestic violence, sexual abuse, neglect, loss of a parent at a young age and poverty.[18]

Alcohol and crime have a closely interconnected relationship, with alcohol consumption being a contributing factor to crime, violence, and antisocial behaviour. Alcohol plays a key role in crimes such as public order offences, domestic violence, assault and murder, as well as rape and sexual assault.[19] Many studies have demonstrated significant, and positive, associations between alcohol consumption and rates of criminal violence, and we can say with confidence that more alcohol drinking tends to result in more violence, and less drinking tends to result in less violence.[20]

The consistent link between alcohol and domestic and gender-based violence has led to the recognition of alcohol as a “risk factor” for intimate partner violence by the World Health Organisation.[21]

7. Child Protection

Alcohol is not, and never will be, an excuse or explanation for domestic violence. However, it is a known driver of domestic violence and research continuously identifies alcohol use as one of the most consistent risk factors for domestic violence and violence against children.[22]

Children have the right to an alcohol-free childhood. They have the right to be protected from domestic abuse. Child protection is everyone's concern, not just parents. A mature and civilised society must protect its children and have their welfare at its core. As Frederick Douglass said – "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults".

The unfortunate reality is that there is an epidemic of domestic abuse in Ireland, with callouts to Gardaí increasing by 45% in the last four years to a shocking 65,224 calls.[23] Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence can happen to anyone, and it can take many forms – psychological/emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and physical abuse. For instance, in 2023, Men's Aid had 8,682 contacts to their domestic violence support service with victims ranging in ages from 18 to 90+ years across the country. [24]

However, the reality is that DSGBV in Ireland is overwhelmingly perpetrated against women and against children. Shockingly, 2024 was a record-breaking year for all the wrong reasons with Women's Aid responding to a record number of contacts across their services. According to their annual report there were 32,144 contacts through frontline services – a 17% increase on the previous year – detailing 41,432 disclosures of abuse against women and 5,333 disclosures of abuse against children.[25]

Alcohol use is implicated in an increased risk of child maltreatment, including physical or sexual abuse and neglect. Indeed, a review of studies examining the presence of both child maltreatment and intimate partner violence found that they occurred during the same period in 45%–70% of studies.[26] Children may experience domestic violence directly, but children who witness domestic violence may also be significantly affected and harmed.

Findings from several studies show that witnessing intimate partner violence can also adversely affect the development of children, with one meta-analysis concluding that "children's exposure to domestic violence is significantly correlated with child problems in the areas of social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive and general health functioning."[27] In many cases, this trauma lasts into adulthood.

8. Operation Encompass

In Britain and Northern Ireland, an information sharing partnership exists between police and schools. If police attend a family home because of a domestic abuse, by the following morning the child's school is informed that an incident has occurred so that the child is met with support on going into school.[28] This programme is called

‘Operation Encompass’, and in its first year in existence in Northern Ireland, 23,000 referrals were made under it.[29]

In Ireland, we know that one in three children are living with a parent who regularly binge drinks or is dependent on alcohol. We also know that in many incidents, alcohol use is the catalyst to significant domestic disruption and abuse.

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.

This programme has been in operation in many parts of the Britain for over a decade and was rolled out across Northern Ireland in 2023. Operation Encompass was first brought to the attention of government over five years ago by Alcohol Action Ireland/Silent Voices. It was included in the Programme for Government, and thankfully, is now committed for in the General Scheme of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences, Domestic Violence and International Instruments) Bill 2025.

In practice, Operation Encompass facilitates an early information sharing partnership between the police service and schools, enabling schools and teachers to offer immediate intervention and support for children and young people experiencing domestic abuse. Information would be shared by Gardaí with a school’s designated officer prior to the start of the next school day, after the Gardaí had attended a domestic incident. This would ensure appropriate assistance and care is given, depending on the needs and wishes of the child.

9. Operation Encompass in Practice

Operation Encompass was created to ensure that by the start of the next school day a child’s school will be informed that there has been a police-attended incident of domestic abuse at the home of the child. This knowledge, given to the school’s trained Key Adult allows the provision of immediate early intervention through overt or silent support, dependent upon the needs and wishes of the child.

This information is shared by the police directly with the school, it involves all incidents of Domestic Abuse and is shared prior to the start of the next school day. Key Adults, (Designated Safeguarding Leads) have been identified within schools and specific training is provided in how to deal with the ‘raw, sensitive and dynamic information’ given by Operation Encompass. This training refers to the identification of the signs and symptoms of a child or young person suffering from domestic abuse, the implications of this trauma and how best to support these children and young people.

10. Trauma Informed Education

For Operation Encompass to be successful, schools, school staff, teachers, and An Garda Síochána must receive the necessary onboarding, training and support for the roll out of the programme. This is especially true for teachers who have children in their classrooms daily who have suffered the trauma of being the victim of, or experiencing, domestic violence.

Teachers are in a unique position to interrupt the negative developmental trajectories associated with trauma if they are given the tools to understand the impact of trauma on development, learning and behaviour.

This is important, because without this knowledge, young people's trauma responses can be seen as challenging or disruptive, leading to punitive or confrontational disciplinary procedures and, on occasion, exclusion from school.[30] This can considerably worsen the overall situation for the child; indeed, research demonstrates that one of the biggest protective factors during childhood is education.[31]

As Dr Catriona O'Toole, Associate Professor, Maynooth University Department of Education, has stated:

> "*When educators understand that adversity has a physiological impact on children's development – making it physically and mentally difficult for them to learn or concentrate, causing them to become emotionally dysregulated, hypervigilant or withdrawn – these behaviours in the classroom are looked at in a different way*". [32]

Trauma-informed practice in schools does not mean that teachers need to do the work of professional therapists, but that they can – and often do – play a significant role in reducing and mitigating negative outcomes by providing strong, stable, and nurturing relationships and creating environments that offer a felt sense of safety.[33] The work teachers do in this regard is to be commended, but it's important that it is not left to individual teachers to drive cultural changes; support for a whole school approach is necessary, and this must be driven by the Department of Education in partnership with teachers and their trade-unions.

11. Conclusion

There is support for Operation Encompass from multiple organisations including the Office of the Children's Ombudsman, ISPCC, Irish Association of Social Workers and Children's Rights Alliance, amongst others.

Operation Encompass is a low-cost intervention which has a proven track record; it merely requires a commitment from schools and An Garda Síochána to safeguard vulnerable children at the earliest possible opportunity and a change in protocols.

Experiencing domestic abuse as a child is child abuse and a child protection issue. Unfortunately, in Ireland, children are often the unseen victims of domestic abuse. Operation Encompass can ensure these children, these victims, are not only seen – but supported.

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