

CAFADA

Children and Families Affected by Domestic Abuse

Exploring Innovation in Multi-Agency Settings: A Study of
Domestic Abuse Notification Systems in England.

Daniel Ash. Associate Professor – University of Stirling
Margaret Malloch. Professor – University of Stirling
Laura Bellussi. Research Fellow – University of Stirling

SEPTEMBER 2024

UNIVERSITY of
STIRLING




THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH


uclan


UNIVERSITY OF
GLOUCESTERSHIRE


Economic
and Social
Research Council



About CAFADA

CAFADA (Developing the Evidence Base for Innovation in Social Care for Children and Families Impacted by Domestic Abuse) was a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Although domestic abuse in childhood is recognised as a major public policy concern, there is wide variation in what services children can access in different local authorities. There is not enough good evidence of what works in supporting children who have experienced domestic abuse. CAFADA used an implementation science approach to assess promising innovations in domestic abuse and children's organisations, social work, police and criminal justice in Scotland and England. This briefing summarises key findings from Workstream Three.

Introduction

This briefing paper reports key findings from research that explored the nature of innovation in multi-agency settings, specifically through the lens of two domestic abuse school notification schemes: Operation Encompass (OE) and Operation Encompass Plus (OE+). OE is a nationwide initiative in England and Wales, while OE Plus was an enhanced, localised version implemented by one English police force. Both interventions were designed to support children exposed to domestic abuse by promptly notifying schools after such incidents, enabling educators to provide timely emotional and psychological support. Our research did not directly evaluate these interventions. Instead, they served as a framework to investigate broader questions about how innovation was initiated, engaged with, valued, and sustained within the social care, education, and criminal justice systems.

Key messages

1. Conceptualisation of Domestic Abuse by Police, Social Care, and Schools

Fragmented Understanding Across Agencies: Our research has revealed significant differences in how domestic abuse is conceptualised by police, social care, and schools. While the police often viewed domestic abuse through a crime-centric lens, social care agencies tended to adopt a broader, welfare-oriented perspective, and schools primarily saw it as a child protection issue. These differing views led to inconsistent interventions and responses, highlighting the need for a more integrated understanding across agencies.

Impact on Intervention Efficacy: The varied conceptualisations of domestic abuse that the study identified, directly influence the design and implementation of interventions like OE and OE+. A narrow focus on risk management, particularly within the police, can limit the effectiveness of broader, more holistic approaches that consider the long-term impacts of domestic abuse on children and families.

2. Navigating the Tensions Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

Challenges of Standardisation vs. Local Adaptation: Our research underscores the tension between the uniform, top-down approach of OE and the more flexible, bottom-up approach of OE+. While OE provides consistency and ease of implementation, it often fails to adapt to local needs. Conversely, OE+ allows for greater customisation and responsiveness but faces challenges with scalability and resource demands.

Resistance to Innovation at the Operational Level: Middle managers and frontline practitioners often resist changes that deviate from established processes due to concerns about risk and accountability. This report highlights the need for leadership to bridge the gap between high-level innovation aspirations and the practical realities of implementation on the ground.

3. Children's and Women's Rights and Voice in Policy and Practice

Underrepresentation of Victims' Voices: Our research identifies a significant gap in the involvement of children and mothers in designing and implementing interventions like OE and OE+. This exclusion not only diminishes the effectiveness of these interventions but also fails to respect the rights of those most affected by domestic abuse.

Need for Participatory Approaches: Policymakers and practitioners are urged to adopt more participatory models that actively include children's and survivor's voices. Ensuring that those who are directly impacted by domestic abuse have a say in shaping the interventions that affect them can lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

4. Sustaining or Scaling Innovations

Resource-Intensive Nature of Comprehensive Models: Our findings highlight the difficulty of sustaining and scaling comprehensive interventions like OE+, which require significant resources and coordination across multiple agencies. While OE+ offers a more holistic response to domestic abuse, its complexity makes it challenging to replicate on a larger scale.

Balancing Depth with Scalability: There is a critical need to balance the depth of support offered by interventions like OE+ and the scalability of more straightforward models like OE. Policymakers must consider how to allocate resources effectively to ensure that innovative practices can be both impactful and broadly implemented.

About Operation Encompass

Non-technical description of methods used. OE and its locally enhanced version, OE+, are early intervention programmes designed to provide immediate support to children exposed to domestic abuse by ensuring that their schools are promptly notified following an incident. The fundamental principle of these interventions is to enable schools (and other agencies in the context of OE+) to offer timely and informed support to affected children, addressing the potential emotional, physical, and psychological impacts as soon as possible.

Development and Key Principles

OE was first developed in 2011 in Plymouth, UK, by a police officer and a headteacher who recognised that schools were not being informed quickly enough when children were exposed to domestic abuse. The initiative was created to fill this gap by establishing a direct and immediate line of communication between the police and schools. The fundamental principles of OE include

prompt notification—ideally before the start of the next school day—and providing relevant contextual information to ensure that schools can provide the necessary support to the child.

OE+ was developed as a local evolution of this model in the English police force which participated in the study, incorporating a multi-agency hub to offer a more comprehensive response to suit local needs. This enhanced version aimed to address not only the immediate needs of the child but also the broader context in which the child lived, including any underlying issues such as poverty, substance abuse, or educational challenges. The multi-agency hub brought together police, social care, education, and other relevant services to collaborate on creating a tailored action plan for each family, ensuring a coordinated and sustained intervention.

Innovative Aspects

The innovative aspect of OE lies in its simplicity and the direct, practical impact it has on children's lives by ensuring timely and informed support. It represents a straightforward yet highly effective way of bridging the gap between police interventions and school support systems.

The innovation in OE+ was its holistic approach, moving beyond simple notifications to include a thorough, multi-agency response that addressed the complex needs of children and families affected by domestic abuse. This model reflects a deeper understanding of the interconnected challenges faced by these families and represents a significant step forward in collaborative intervention.

How did we assess OE and OE Plus

Scoping Review and Data Collection

We began with a scoping review that involved gathering primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests sent to police forces across England and Wales. These requests aimed to gather detailed information on how police notification schemes were implemented, including any local adaptations and the extent of their application. In addition to the FOI data, we reviewed academic and grey literature to understand the broader context in which these interventions operate. This review helped us to frame our analysis within the existing body of knowledge on domestic abuse interventions, multi-agency collaboration, and innovation in public services.

Interviews and Thematic Analysis

Our primary method of assessing OE and OE+ was through interviews with key stakeholders, including police officers, social care professionals, educators, and other practitioners involved in these programs. These interviews were conducted both online, via platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, and in person, providing a comprehensive view of the participants' experiences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

We employed thematic analysis to identify and explore the key themes emerging from these interviews. This method allowed us to systematically analyse the data, uncovering patterns and insights related to how innovation is perceived, initiated, and sustained within the context of OE and OE+. Each transcript was carefully reviewed by members of the research team, who coded the data to highlight significant themes and sub-themes.

Analysis - Focus on Broader Questions of Innovation

Rather than conducting a traditional evaluation of the efficacy of OE and OE+, our research used these interventions as a lens to explore broader questions about innovation in multi-agency settings. We focused on understanding the processes and dynamics that shape innovation, including the challenges and opportunities that arise when different agencies collaborate to address complex social issues like domestic abuse.

Through this multi-faceted approach, we gathered rich, qualitative insights into the operation and impact of OE and OE+, providing a comprehensive understanding of how innovation unfolds in this context. Our findings offer valuable lessons for policymakers and practitioners seeking to foster innovation in similar multi-agency interventions.

What did we find?

What were the barriers and enablers of the innovation?

The exploration of innovation within OE and OE+ revealed a nuanced and complex landscape shaped by various factors that either facilitated or impeded the successful implementation and sustainability of these interventions.

Barriers to Innovation

A significant barrier to innovation emerged from the divergent conceptualisations of domestic abuse across the critical agencies involved – namely, the police, social care, and educational institutions. The police, with their crime-centric perspective, often approached domestic abuse as a series of incidents requiring immediate risk management and law enforcement responses. This focus on the criminal aspects tended to prioritise short-term interventions over the sustained, holistic support needed to address the more profound, more pervasive impacts of domestic abuse on children and families.

In contrast, social care professionals and educators were more inclined to view domestic abuse through a broader lens, considering its long-term effects on the well-being and development of children. These differing perspectives led to misalignments in goals, priorities, and strategies, making establishing a unified approach across agencies challenging. Another substantial barrier was the culture of risk aversion and the emphasis on accountability, particularly among middle management. This cautious stance was rooted in concerns about potential legal liabilities and professional consequences if new, untested approaches led to adverse outcomes. Middle managers, often responsible for implementing these interventions on the ground, were understandably wary of deviating from established processes. This risk-averse environment stifled creativity and innovation, making it challenging to introduce and sustain new methods, especially in the context of domestic abuse interventions, where the stakes are high, and the margin for error is perceived to be minimal.

Resource constraints further compounded these challenges. The resource-intensive nature of OE+, which required extensive coordination, time, and personnel across multiple agencies, made it difficult to sustain and scale. While the comprehensive approach of OE+ was its strength, offering a more integrated and holistic response to domestic abuse, it also demanded significant investments that many agencies struggled to maintain. Budget cuts, staffing shortages, and the ongoing need for specialised training created additional pressures, limiting the ability of agencies to fully commit to and sustain the model. This financial and logistical strain often forced compromises, diluting the programme's intended impact. Moreover, the limited involvement of children and mothers in the design and development of OE and OE+ presented another critical barrier. Professionals primarily shaped these interventions without sufficient input from those directly affected by domestic abuse. While efficient in some respects, this top-down approach often resulted in a disconnect between the intervention strategies and the actual needs and experiences of the children and families they were meant to serve. The exclusion of these voices reduced the programmes' relevance and effectiveness and missed the opportunity to create more tailored and responsive interventions.

Enablers of Innovation

Despite these barriers, several factors acted as powerful enablers of innovation within the context of OE and OE+. One of the most significant was the strength of multi-agency collaboration, particularly in the case of OE+. This model brought together various stakeholders, including police, social care, educational institutions, and other relevant agencies, to work collaboratively towards a common goal. The pooling of resources, expertise, and information across these sectors enabled a more comprehensive and coordinated response to domestic abuse, allowing for interventions that were more informed and contextually appropriate.

Leadership and advocacy from senior management also played a crucial role in driving innovation. Leaders who were genuinely committed to improving outcomes for children and families provided the vision and momentum necessary to push these initiatives forward. Their ability to navigate the complexities of multi-agency collaboration and secure buy-in from various stakeholders was instrumental in overcoming some of the resistance and inertia often accompanying innovation attempts. However, this leadership needed to be sustained to ensure the innovations did not falter once initial enthusiasm waned.

The flexibility inherent in the OE+ model was another key enabler, allowing for local adaptation and customisation to meet the specific needs of different communities. This adaptability was essential in fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among local practitioners, who could tailor the intervention to their unique circumstances. This bottom-up approach, in contrast to the more rigid, top-down structure of OE, facilitated a more responsive and contextually sensitive implementation, which was crucial for the success of the intervention.

Finally, the holistic approach embedded in OE+—which sought to address not only the immediate effects of domestic abuse but also the broader social, emotional, and educational needs of children—was a critical enabler of its effectiveness. By moving beyond simple notifications to schools and involving a range of agencies in developing comprehensive support plans, OE+ provided a more sustained and meaningful intervention. This holistic focus provided a potential basis to break the cycle of domestic abuse more effectively, with the possibility of long-term benefits that were more likely to lead to positive outcomes for the children and families involved.

What did professionals tell us about the intervention?

The feedback from professionals involved in the OE and OE+ interventions revealed a complex picture of both the successes and challenges encountered during implementation. Their reflections provided insight into the practical realities of applying these models within a multi-agency context.

Inconsistent Implementation and Awareness

Professionals highlighted the inconsistency in the implementation of OE across different areas. There was an apparent concern that the OE model, while well-intentioned, often did not fully align with national guidelines when implemented locally. For instance, many professionals noted that the intended promptness of notifications—meant to reach schools before the start of the next school day—was not always achieved. Delays in notifications were common, undermining the core objective of providing timely support to children.

Additionally, our research identified that awareness and engagement with training and resources provided as part of OE were often lacking. Many schools had not completed the recommended training, and some were unaware of the detailed guidelines intended to support effective intervention. This lack of engagement left schools underprepared to respond effectively to the notifications they received, contributing to a passive approach to dealing with the situations.

Challenges in Multi-Agency Collaboration

Professionals involved in OE+ reported that while the intervention aimed to enhance multi-agency collaboration, in practice, this was difficult to achieve consistently. The resource-intensive nature of the OE+ model, which required significant coordination among police, social care, and educational institutions, often strained the capacities of the agencies involved. Our findings suggested that this strain was exacerbated by the broader context of public service pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted the availability and responsiveness of staff.

Professionals also expressed concerns about the sustainability of the OE+ model. While the multi-agency hub was designed to provide a more integrated response to domestic abuse, the level of collaboration required was challenging to maintain over time, particularly in an environment of shifting political priorities and budgetary constraints.

Reluctance to Innovate Beyond Established Processes

Our research highlighted a notable reluctance among police and social care professionals to innovate beyond the established processes of OE. This hesitation was partly driven by concerns about risk management—specifically, the fear of deviating from a nationally recognised procedure and the potential accountability issues that might arise if something went wrong. This cautious approach limited the willingness to adopt more proactive or comprehensive measures following notifications, which in turn restricted the effectiveness of the interventions.

Tensions Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

Professionals also discussed the tensions between top-down directives and the need for bottom-up innovation. While the OE model was implemented as a standardised, top-down approach, the local version (OE~) and OE+ highlighted the need for more flexible, locally adapted strategies. However, the ability to implement such strategies was often hindered by the rigid nature of top-down processes, leading to frustrations among practitioners who felt constrained by the lack of flexibility.

What did we learn about the involvement of child and adult survivors in the intervention?

Our research provides an understanding of the involvement of child and adult survivors in the OE and OE+ interventions. While the overall involvement of survivors in these programmes was limited, there were significant positive outcomes in instances where survivors were actively engaged in the action planning process, which was a key feature of OE+.

Generally, the report highlights that there was a lack of direct involvement of child and adult survivors in the design and development stages of both OE and OE+. These interventions were shaped mainly by professionals, often without sufficient input from those directly affected by domestic abuse. This professional driven approach meant that interventions were not always fully aligned with the specific needs and experiences of the children and families they were intended to support. As a result, the responses were sometimes generic and did not adequately address the complex realities survivors faced.

Within the OE+ model, where action planning was a central component, involving survivors at the planning stage led to markedly better outcomes. The action planning process in OE+ involved collaboratively developing tailored support plans that addressed each family's specific needs and circumstances, incorporating input from the survivors themselves. This engagement allowed professionals to create more customised and responsive interventions. The involvement of survivors in OE+ ensured that the support provided was more relevant, empowering, and likely to result in sustainable positive outcomes, as it directly reflected the lived experiences and immediate needs of those affected.

Summary

1. Tension between standardisation and adaptability

Our research highlights the inherent tension between the need for standardised approaches, such as those seen in Operation Encompass (OE), and the adaptability required for effective local implementation. While standardisation offers consistency, it can also oversimplify complex realities, limiting the effectiveness of interventions.

2. Power dynamics in innovation

There was an emphasis on critical role of power and authority in shaping innovation within multi-agency settings. The contrast between the top-down nature of OE and the more grassroots, locally-driven OE+ illustrates the challenges of reconciling central authority with local autonomy and creativity.

3. Challenges in conceptualising domestic abuse

The different ways in which domestic abuse is conceptualised by police, social care, and educational institutions significantly affect the implementation and success of interventions. A crime-centric view might lead to narrow, risk-focused responses that overlook children's and families' broader, ongoing needs.

4. Sustainability of innovation

The sustainability of complex, resource-intensive interventions like OE+ is precarious, particularly in environments with shifting political priorities and limited resources. Effective innovation requires initial implementation, deep institutional embedding, and ongoing support.

5. Epistemological challenges

Our findings underscore the contested nature of knowledge in these interventions, questioning whose voices and experiences are valued in the design and implementation of solutions. The marginalisation of children's and women's voices indicates the need for more inclusive, participatory innovation models.

Recommendations

Enhance survivor involvement

Policy and practice should prioritise the inclusion of children and adult survivors in designing and implementing interventions like OE and OE+. This participatory approach would ensure that interventions are more closely aligned with the real needs and experiences of those affected by domestic abuse.

Promote flexibility in implementation

Encourage shifting from rigid, top-down models to more adaptable, locally-driven approaches. This would allow for tailoring interventions to specific community contexts, improving the relevance and effectiveness of support provided to children and families.

Strengthen multi-agency collaboration

Invest in mechanisms that facilitate sustained and effective collaboration across agencies, particularly in resource-constrained environments. This includes providing adequate training, resources, and time for agencies to work together meaningfully.

Prioritise comprehensive training and awareness

Ensure that all professionals involved in the intervention, particularly in educational settings, receive comprehensive training beyond essential awareness. This training should equip them with the skills and knowledge to respond effectively to domestic abuse notifications.

Support sustainable innovation

Develop policies that support complex interventions like OE+, including stable funding, continuous professional development, and institutional backing. This would help sustain innovative practices and prevent the erosion of successful initiatives due to resource or political constraints.

How can you find out more?

CAFADA has produced several briefings, as well as published research. These can be found here:

<https://cafada.stir.ac.uk>

Suggested citation

Ash, D.P., Malloch, M., Bellussi, L. (2024) Exploring Innovation in Multi-Agency Settings: A Study of Domestic Abuse Notification Systems in England. CAFADA Briefing Paper 4, Available at

<https://cafada-wp.stir.ac.uk>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported License.

Acknowledgments

CAFADA is a collaborative of researchers from the Universities of Stirling, Edinburgh, Central Lancashire and Gloucestershire. We would like to thank the children, young people and adult professionals who participated in the research. The support of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) (Grant number ES/T001399/1) is gratefully acknowledged.