

# CAFADA

# Children and Families Affected by Domestic Abuse

Innovation in multi-agency settings for supporting children  
and families affected by domestic abuse: police notification  
schemes

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## About CAFADA

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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 is a preview of a section of the main report (in press) for the criminal justice workstream of the CAFADA project.

## Introduction

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Responses from the police and criminal justice sectors to domestic abuse (DA) have frequently been criticised for lacking a sufficient focus on children<sup>1</sup>. As a response to these criticisms, police notification systems have been developed across England and Wales, which typically involve the police and/or social care raising a notification whenever the police attend a domestic abuse incident where a child was present. One of the main notification schemes that has developed nationally is called Operation Encompass (OE), which was founded in 2011 in Plymouth, inspired by the need to improve the support provided to children who witness – and therefore indirectly or directly experience - domestic abuse. It was conceived by a police officer and a headteacher, who realised that schools were not being informed promptly when a child had been exposed to potentially traumatic events. The scheme was developed so that the police would notify schools immediately after a domestic abuse incident had occurred, allowing educators to offer support to an affected child the following day.

The introduction and operation of school notification schemes served as a valuable context for the CAFADA Workstream 3 (WS3) to explore broader questions about innovation within the intersection of social care, education, and criminal justice responses to domestic abuse. Although our study examined two specific types of school notification schemes in one UK context, our research did not focus on evaluating the efficacy or success of these notification systems. Instead, these schemes served as a lens or case example for investigating how innovation is approached, planned, structured, and implemented, with a particular focus on understanding why some innovations thrive while others falter or fail, and how this impacts efforts to improve outcomes for children and families.

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<sup>1</sup> Millar, A., Devaney, J. & Butler, M. Emotional Intelligence: Challenging the Perceptions and Efficacy of 'Soft Skills' in Policing Incidents of Domestic Abuse Involving Children. *Journal of Family Violence* **34**, 577–588 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-018-0018-9>

Initially, our research was intended to focus on delivery of the Operation Encompass model within one English police force. However, upon examining the notification approaches in use, it became clear that two distinct school notification models were operating concurrently in the same area: a local version of Operation Encompass that implemented some, but not all, of the methods outlined in the national OE guidelines, which we refer to in this report as Operation Encompass local (OE~), and an enhanced notification model that incorporated a multi-agency hub and response mechanism. For this study, we refer to this enhanced notification model as Operation Encompass Plus (OE+) for ease of comparison.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, our research expanded to examine both OE~ and OE+ as a context for exploring innovation.

## Methods

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Our research involved two main activities: a broad scoping review of police notification schemes across England and Wales and an in-depth examination of the implementation and organisation of school notifications within a single English police force.

The scoping review explored how police notification schemes operate and the various forms they take. This involved collecting information through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests sent to all police forces in England and Wales to understand the operation and scope of notification schemes, as well as reviewing relevant academic and grey literature to contextualise and critically analyse evidence about these schemes.

Our focus was on police-school notification schemes for primary and secondary schools, particularly Operation Encompass (OE). We examined where this innovation had been introduced, evaluated existing evidence on its implementation and impact, and critically assessed its broader significance. The review also aimed to explore whether OE and OE+ could be considered innovative approaches and to draw broader insights about innovation within multi-agency work in this context.

To investigate the implementation and operation of school notification schemes within one police force area, we conducted interviews with key stakeholders from policing, education, and social care. Although focus groups were initially planned, Covid-19 restrictions and the resulting pressures on public service staff made these unfeasible. Instead, individual interviews were conducted remotely during the initial phase using platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or telephone. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted when feasible.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. These interviews explored stakeholders' expectations of police notifications and their perceptions of what constitutes 'success' in this context.

Thematic Analysis was conducted using NVivo software and manual coding. Each member of the workstream reviewed the interview transcripts, identifying emergent themes and relevant sub-

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Operation Encompass Plus, as an enhanced notification approach, is a term used solely for research purposes within this study and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Operation Encompass in any way. However, it does use the basic approaches of notifications passing between police and schools that are used in Operation Encompass.

themes. These themes were further developed through analysis meetings and cross-workstream workshops.

While specific data excerpts are not presented in this report, the findings will contribute to a series of academic papers currently in development. For this report, we identify the central themes of relevance to this workstream within the CAFADA project.

## Methodological note

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Among the services involved with or connected to CAFADA, practices evolved differently over the four years of research, with some adapting, others pausing, and some ceasing operations altogether. Notably, OE+, as a service that engaged in school notifications, ceased to operate. The hub was repurposed towards tackling juvenile violence and gangs due to changing political priorities, budget reductions, and policing constraints during the later stages of our research.

Despite these challenges, we were able to capture the functioning of both OE~ and OE+ within the broader multi-agency environment at that time. This has allowed us to extract some insights into the nature of innovation in this context, shedding light on some fundamental areas of concern relating to innovation that include the Conceptualisation of Domestic Abuse by Police, Social Care, and Schools; Navigating the Tensions Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches; Children's and Women's Rights and Voice in Policy and Practice; and, Sustaining or Scaling Innovations.

## Introduction to Operation Encompass and Operation Encompass Plus

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According to a set of national guidelines for the implementation of Operation Encompass, all police-attended incidents of domestic abuse, as defined by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, where children are related to any of the involved adults, should be promptly communicated to the child's educational setting. Ideally, these notifications should be shared before the start of the next school day, or in some cases, in real-time, with a strong emphasis on ensuring the information reaches the designated Key Adult in the school before the child arrives, preferably by 8:30 a.m. The guidelines also recommend that police forces establish formal Information Sharing Agreements with educational settings and ensure that Operation Encompass notifications include not only details of the incident but also any relevant contextual information that might affect the child.

Operation Encompass is framed as an early intervention initiative designed to support children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse. The official guidance emphasises the importance of prompt information sharing between the police and schools to facilitate timely support for affected children. Specifically, when the police attend a domestic abuse incident involving children, they are expected to notify the child's school through a designated Key Adult, typically a Level 3 trained Designated Safeguarding Lead, before the start of the next school day.



This notification process is intended to enable the school to provide immediate and appropriate support to the child, addressing potential emotional and psychological impacts.

The guidance further specifies that Operation Encompass notifications should be comprehensive, including detailed information about the incident—such as the time and location, the names and dates of birth of the children involved, and any observations made by the attending officers. The rationale behind this detailed approach is to allow schools to tailor their support to each child's specific needs, offering a more informed and sensitive response. Additionally, the guidelines emphasise the importance of establishing information-sharing agreements between police forces and educational settings to ensure that shared information is both confidential and effectively utilised to support the child.

Operation Encompass also provides schools with resources and training, as recommended in the guidance, to better equip them in supporting children affected by domestic abuse. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that while the guidance offers a clear framework for the operation of OE, the extent to which these provisions are followed can vary significantly across different regions and schools. This variation often depends on local practices, the level of awareness, and the resources available, which can influence how effectively the OE model is implemented.

In the police force being studied, Operation Encompass Plus (OE+) was designed as an enhanced, multi-agency intervention aimed at providing comprehensive support to children and families affected by domestic abuse. Unlike the standard Operation Encompass model, which primarily focused on notifying schools about domestic abuse incidents, OE+ sought to create a more integrated and proactive response. In practical terms, OE+ operated through a multi-agency hub that brought together police, social care, educational institutions, and other relevant agencies to collaborate on assessing and addressing the needs of affected children. Upon receiving a notification of a domestic abuse incident, the hub would convene to conduct a thorough assessment of the child's situation, considering not only the immediate effects of the incident but also any underlying issues such as poverty, substance abuse, or educational challenges. Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) played a key role in this process, conducting home visits and liaising with schools to develop a tailored action plan that addressed the specific needs of the child and family. This plan intended to provide ongoing support, with regular follow-ups and adjustments as needed, ensuring that the intervention was responsive and sustainable. The overarching goal of OE+ was to move beyond simple notifications and instead offer a holistic, long-term approach to breaking the cycle of domestic abuse and promoting healthier family environments by working co-productively with children and families.

## Implementation of Operation Encompass - the local context

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In the area under study, it became evident that the implementation of OE did not fully align with the national guidance, reflecting a trend observed in other police force areas across the UK. Notifications intended to be delivered promptly—preferably before the start of the next school day—were frequently delayed, sometimes taking days rather than hours to reach schools. This delay undermined the initiative's core objective of providing timely support to children affected by

domestic abuse. Moreover, while most schools were aware of OE, many had not completed the recommended training and were often unaware of the detailed guidelines and resources available to support effective intervention. This lack of engagement with the training and resources meant that schools were not fully equipped to respond effectively to the notifications they received.

Furthermore, many police practitioners lacked comprehensive awareness of OE's protocols, leading to inconsistent practices in sharing crucial background information about incidents and their potential impact on children. This gap in knowledge often resulted in important details being omitted from the notifications sent to schools, which in turn compromised the effectiveness of the intervention process. As a result, the intended seamless flow of information between police and educational settings was often not achieved, limiting the ability of schools to provide appropriate and timely support to affected children.

In practice, school staff were often uncertain about how to respond to OE notifications. Without clear guidance or a structured framework to follow, many adopted a passive approach, opting for a 'watching brief' or 'wait and see' stance rather than implementing proactive support measures. Consequently, the notifications often did not trigger significant action, and the potential benefits of early intervention were not fully realised. Additionally, social care staff responsible for sending notifications typically provided schools with only the most basic of contextual information such as the police incident classification, date, and location of the incident, without offering any broader context or additional support information. This minimalist approach to information sharing was frequently justified by citing concerns about potential GDPR violations or other legal or policy restrictions, highlighting the tension between the need for effective communication, and the imperative to protect privacy.

Despite these challenges, there was a noticeable reluctance among police and social care professionals to make significant changes to the OE model. This hesitation, in part, was driven by concerns about risk management—specifically, the fear that modifying a nationally recognised process could lead to accountability issues if a serious incident occurred afterwards. Practitioners and managers were understandably cautious about being held responsible for any negative outcomes resulting from deviating from a nationally accepted and embedded procedure. This cautious stance was further reinforced by the perception that a top-down process, once established, is inherently inflexible and challenging to modify without substantial evidence to justify changes.

Additionally, there was limited awareness of the full scope of the National OE implementation guidelines and a reluctance to adopt the more advanced elements of the guidance, particularly those concerning proactive actions following notification or accessing OE support such as telephone advice. Some practitioners within the police and schools expressed concerns that taking proactive steps beyond a watching brief could inadvertently re-traumatise a child, breaching trauma-informed practice principles, or further complicate matters for victims of abuse. Some argued that intervening without a comprehensive understanding of the incident's dynamics might exacerbate the situation, potentially leading to a resurgence of conflict or an increased risk of harm if the perpetrator perceived that the victim had involved external agencies.

## Implementation of 'Operation Encompass Plus'

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In response to the limitations observed from the local implementation of OE, local practitioners identified the need for a more 'bottom-up' strategy to this type of activity—one that would provide them greater control over risk management and allow the development of more effective interventions. Rather than disrupting the existing OE process, they sought to complement it by creating a more robust and comprehensive model. This led to the development of OE+, which aimed to offer a more thorough and impactful response to the needs of children exposed to domestic abuse.

OE+ was conceived as part of a multi-agency hub model, designed to strengthen collaboration between police, schools, and other agencies whenever a school notification was triggered. By embedding OE+ within a broader early intervention framework, the approach not only addressed domestic violence but also tackled a wider range of issues affecting children and families. This model utilised information and intelligence from schools, police, and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), with weekly assessment meetings involving representatives from various sectors and organisations. These meetings assessed notifications and referrals based on level of need, with Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) conducting enhanced needs assessments and developing action plans that spanned "Home, School, and Street" environments. The intent was to create a coherent and unified response to domestic abuse, drawing together data and resources from multiple public sector organisations. This approach was designed to replicate many of the functions and practices of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). However, unlike the MASH model, which focuses on safeguarding at higher levels of risk, OE+ addressed lower-level risks that did not meet formal safeguarding thresholds. OE+ was conceived as an early intervention strategy, using reports of domestic abuse as a trigger to review the broader family and child context. This review aimed to provide support across multiple domains, including education, poverty, housing, employment, and access to community and third-sector organisations that assist struggling families.

While OE+ represented a significant advancement in providing comprehensive support, it also introduced several challenges. The model's resource-intensive nature—requiring substantial time, personnel, and coordination—made implementation difficult. Its reliance on collaboration between multiple agencies, although beneficial in theory, often proved challenging in practice. Differing priorities, bureaucratic and policy barriers, and the logistical complexities of sustaining ongoing, multi-faceted interventions for lower levels of risk, harm, or need posed significant hurdles, especially compared to the more immediate focus of high-risk or emergency response work. Additionally, the process of co-producing action plans with children and families, intended to be inclusive and empowering, sometimes encountered resistance. Aligning the diverse needs and expectations of all involved parties, including partners and families, could be difficult, further complicating the model's execution.

A key component of OE+ was its focus on reducing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) by fostering healthier family environments through early and sustained intervention. PCSOs were pivotal in conducting assertive outreach and providing tailored support plans based on a whole-family approach. This proactive engagement was designed to build trust and ensure the relevance

and sustainability of interventions. However, this approach also highlighted the challenges of maintaining consistent and effective communication among all stakeholders, particularly in cases where families had complex needs that required ongoing, intensive support.

The OE+ model represented a significant departure from the National OE approach, highlighting the delicate balance between innovation and practicality. On one hand, OE+ addressed many of the local concerns associated with the original OE model, particularly the hesitancy to engage with families post-notification due to fears of exacerbating risks. By incorporating improved information sharing and thorough preparation, OE+ enabled practitioners to engage with families more confidently and effectively.

However, the increased complexity and resource demands of OE+ presented challenges for scalability and long-term sustainability, especially in the context of budget constraints and the necessity for continuous inter-agency collaboration. These factors often placed significant strain on practitioners and systems, limiting the model's broader applicability.

Ultimately, OE+ provided a more comprehensive framework for supporting children and families affected by domestic abuse, with its multi-dimensional approach aimed at reducing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) providing a strong focus for practitioners. However, its implementation underscored the persistent tension between the aspiration for innovative, holistic interventions and the practical limitations of delivering such support within resource-constrained environments. This highlighted the challenge of achieving a balance between depth of intervention and sustainability in the delivery of complex social programmes.

## **Broader Themes and Implications for Innovation in Domestic Abuse Interventions**

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While our examination of OE and OE+ provided valuable insights into the specific practices of early intervention and multi-agency collaboration in response to domestic abuse, the focus of our research lay in understanding the broader processes of innovation within this context. Through the lens of OE and OE+, we sought to uncover how innovations are conceived, implemented, and managed within the complex interplay of police, social care, and educational systems. This section delves into the broader themes our research aimed to illuminate, exploring how these interventions reflect the challenges and opportunities inherent in introducing and sustaining innovation in a highly structured and risk-averse environment. By focusing on these broader implications, we aim to shed light on the critical factors that influence the success or failure of innovative practices in addressing domestic abuse and, more generally, within public sector interventions.



# The Conceptualisation of Domestic Abuse by Police, Social Care, and Schools

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Our examination of OE and OE+ reveals significant insights into how domestic abuse (DA) was conceptualised by police, social care, and educational institutions, which then affected innovation. This conceptualisation is not merely a theoretical exercise but has implications for how these agencies respond to domestic abuse, allocate resources, and interact with victims, particularly women and children.

Within the police force, the conceptualisation of domestic abuse was rooted in a crime-centric framework. DA was primarily seen as a series of criminal incidents, each to be managed as a discrete event requiring law enforcement intervention and management of offending with support, often through referral to other agencies, of victims. Children, unless they were deemed at severe risk of harm, were often absent from the focus of post-incident support. This perspective was evident in the OE model approach, where the focus was mainly on recording incidents and notifying schools with minimal follow-up or consideration of DA's broader social and psychological impacts on children and families. The police response, in this context, tended to prioritise immediate risk management and the enforcement of legal boundaries, sometimes at the expense of a more nuanced understanding of the ongoing, complex nature of the DA being reported as it relates to children and families. Although the OE+ model sought to integrate a more holistic approach through multi-agency collaboration and continuous support for affected families, it required ongoing reinforcement among frontline officers to improve the quality of information collected. The practitioners who initiated and managed OE+ within the police had to consistently advocate for this new approach to maintain interest across the Force area.

Police senior managers, though making strides by supporting the development of OE+, often regarded training and awareness programmes—such as those on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)—as supplementary rather than integral to their core responsibilities. This was particularly true when considering the cost and time required for the expansive and conceptual training to embed such a fundamental shift in the police approach to managing DA. This perspective was also evident in the lack of changes to supporting processes, such as Public Protection Notices (PPNs) filed by officers reporting domestic incidents involving children. These PPNs, which triggered school notifications, remained largely unchanged despite efforts by OE+ practitioners to include more comprehensive non-crime information, such as observed evidence of ACEs during incidents or other more detailed and structured observation notes. Resistance to altering the PPNs stemmed from their long-standing, top-down local and national implementation, with officers reluctant to invest additional time in documenting incidents when they were already under significant time pressures. Similarly, social care professionals were hesitant to adjust the notifications sent to schools, citing concerns over the additional workload, the lack of detailed information from police officers, and apprehensions about sharing confidential information with schools without, in their view, 'proper' consent.

Social care agencies argued that their conceptualisation of domestic abuse encompassed a broader perspective that included the long-term welfare of children and families. This view was shared by many practitioners, particularly among those who developed OE+, which significantly

shaped its design and implementation. However, several police policymakers perceived such models as more aligned with 'social work' rather than traditional police work. Despite recognising the need for early intervention and prevention strategies, the police often framed these initiatives in terms of managing and reducing risk rather than supporting children and families in a holistic manner. While risk management remained of critical concern, social care practitioners appeared more attuned to the cumulative and intergenerational impacts of domestic abuse. However, even within social care, the focus on managing immediate risk often overshadowed the need for sustained, holistic interventions that address the underlying causes and broader context of DA. This highlights challenges in integrating a more comprehensive and long-term approach to DA work within any system with a core responsibility for crisis management.

For school professionals, DA was primarily conceptualised as a child protection issue. The role of educational institutions in responding to DA was typically explained as part of a broader safeguarding mandate, where the focus was on ensuring that children are safe and supported within the school environment. However, our research into OE and OE+ suggests that schools often struggle with knowing how to respond effectively to DA notifications, particularly when notifications lack sufficient detail or follow-up support from social care or the police.

For the OE model, schools were frequently left to interpret notifications with minimal guidance, leading to a range of responses, from passive monitoring to more proactive engagement. The lack of a clear framework for action meant that the conceptualisation of DA within schools was often reactive and inconsistent, shaped more by the immediate demands of safeguarding than by a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of DA. In contrast, the OE+ model attempted to provide a more structured and supportive framework for schools, integrating their role into a broader multi-agency response. However, even in this context, the schools' focus remained primarily on mitigating immediate risks to children, with less emphasis on addressing the broader impacts of domestic abuse on the family.

The different ways in which DA was conceptualised by police, social care, and educational institutions had significant implications for designing and implementing interventions. While essential for addressing the legal aspects of DA, a crime-centric view risks neglecting the ongoing and multifaceted nature of abuse, leading to interventions that may be too narrow in scope. Similarly, the focus on child protection within schools, while critical for safeguarding, might result in fragmented responses that do not fully address the entire family's needs.

The emphasis on risk management across the three sectors often overshadowed and complicated efforts to deliver preventative work and long-term support. This reactive stance was further entrenched by the top-down structure of models like OE, which left local practitioners with limited flexibility to adapt interventions to the specific needs of their communities.

In contrast, OE+ sought to address this limitation through a more holistic and integrated approach, recognising the importance of a broader, collaborative response to domestic abuse. While this represented a significant conceptual shift, the practical challenges of sustaining such an approach—particularly in terms of resource allocation, inter-agency coordination, and securing practitioner buy-in—underscored the difficulties of translating this vision into effective, long-term practice.

The way DA was conceptualised by police, social care, and schools significantly influenced the effectiveness of both OE and OE+. Our research indicates that while each sector contributed valuable perspectives, there remains a pressing need for a more integrated and holistic understanding of DA. This understanding should extend beyond immediate risk management to include prevention, long-term support, and meaningful family involvement in the design and implementation of interventions. Such an approach would benefit from being interdisciplinary rather than merely multi-disciplinary. This shift requires organisations to move beyond collaborating within their own established frameworks and instead co-create shared frameworks, policies, and processes. By fostering this deeper level of integration, we argue that agencies could develop more effective and sustainable interventions capable of addressing DA with a stronger focus on children and families.

## Navigating the Tensions Between Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches

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In multi-agency collaboration and innovation, particularly within the context of DA interventions, the dichotomy between top-down and bottom-up approaches presents a compelling area for research. Each approach offers distinct advantages and faces inherent challenges, and the experiences drawn from OE and OE+, provide valuable insights into the dynamics of such approaches.

**Top-down approaches**, exemplified by implementing schemes such as OE across large and diverse geographical areas, are often praised for their potential to deliver consistency and standardisation across such settings. By establishing a uniform framework, top-down models can ensure that foundational practices are applied uniformly, providing a coherent baseline from which to operate. This uniformity might be particularly advantageous in scenarios where rapid deployment is necessary, as it allows for the swift dissemination of practices without the complications of local variation. Furthermore, the clarity and efficiency of top-down directives can be instrumental in environments where time and resources are constrained.

However, uniformity that underpins the effectiveness of top-down approaches might also present challenges. Our research suggests that the implementation of OE was marked by limited adaptability to local contexts, potentially stifling the capacity for nuanced responses to the unique challenges faced across different areas. This rigidity hindered the intervention's effectiveness and fostered a sense of disengagement among local practitioners. The imposition of a nationally prescribed model, without sufficient input from those on the ground, resulted in a disconnect between policy and practice, leading to a mechanical adherence to procedures that may not have fully addressed the specific needs of the community.

A risk-averse culture that sometimes accompanies top-down approaches might further exacerbate these issues. Practitioners concerned about the potential repercussions of deviating from established protocols can resist innovation, fearing that any departure from a sanctioned model might lead to adverse outcomes for which they could be held accountable. This defensive posture, while understandable, limits the scope for creative problem-solving and adaptation, reinforcing a status quo that might not be well-suited to the complex nature of DA situations.

In contrast, **bottom-up approaches** might offer a more flexible and responsive alternative characterised by their adaptability to local conditions. The evolution of OE+ could serve as a case example, illustrating how grassroots innovation, driven by practitioners who are closely acquainted with the specific challenges of their communities, might yield more contextually appropriate and practical solutions. By fostering an environment in which local actors are empowered to shape interventions, bottom-up approaches could enhance the relevance of the support provided and cultivate a greater sense of ownership and commitment among those responsible for its implementation.

However, bottom-up approaches are not without their complexities. Our research highlighted the potential for inconsistency in implementation because the flexibility that allows for local adaptation can lead to significant variations in the quality and scope of interventions across different areas. This variability could pose a challenge for ensuring equitable access to support services, particularly in a landscape as diverse as that of DA interventions. Furthermore, the resource-intensive nature of bottom-up models, as evidenced by the demands of OE+, raises important questions about sustainability and scalability. The extensive coordination and collaboration required to maintain such an approach might strain already limited resources, potentially undermining its long-term viability.

The bottom-up model's reliance on continuous evaluation and data collection to justify its existence underscores another layer of complexity. While this iterative process is crucial for refining and improving interventions, it could also place additional burdens on practitioners who must navigate the dual demands of innovation and accountability. Securing consistent funding and institutional support for bottom-up initiatives might remain a persistent challenge, particularly in environments with low appetite for risk and high demand for immediate, measurable outcomes.

A paradox emerged in our research concerning attitudes toward innovation within the context of DA management, particularly in the intersecting space between top-down and bottom-up approaches like OE and OE+. Senior managers often expressed a strong commitment to fostering innovation and encouraging staff to explore new approaches, including those aimed at improving the effectiveness of DA intervention. However, according to our research, this aspirational stance encountered significant resistance at the middle management level, where the practical demands of risk management, process adherence, and operational consistency took precedence.

Some participants reported that the push for innovation by senior leaders was often driven by a desire to enhance organisational performance and the pressures of the police promotion process. In a highly competitive environment, where few top positions are available, aspiring candidates are expected—and frequently required—to demonstrate leadership by developing innovative projects. However, the short promotion cycles frequently resulted in innovations that were perceived as tokenistic, with limited focus on building the foundations necessary for sustained long-term success.

Participants highlighted that the short-term focus of many senior-led innovations often meant that critical components—such as robust information-sharing solutions, securing lasting support from partner agencies, and obtaining buy-in from senior officers for essential funding and staffing—were frequently overlooked in the rush to implement projects and demonstrate quick wins. They noted

that projects they had championed, such as OE+, often lost momentum and the driving force needed to sustain them when a senior officer achieved promotion or moved on. Without the passion and advocacy of their original leaders, these initiatives were frequently deprioritised or abandoned entirely (OE+ itself was discontinued after three years of operation). This pattern of transient innovation led many frontline practitioners to view such initiatives as superficial, short-lived, and disruptive. Practitioners expressed frustration, describing new projects as "yet another initiative that doesn't work," and lamenting the cyclical "reinvention of the wheel," often in poorly planned, inadequately resourced, and ultimately ineffective ways.

Regarding implementation and delivery, middle managers, who were directly responsible for overseeing the practical application of DA interventions such as OE and OE+, often faced the challenge of making critical decisions in complex, high-stakes environments. While senior leaders championed innovation and service improvement, middle managers were acutely aware of the risks associated with deviating from established processes, particularly those governed by stringent legislative and policy frameworks. Such deviations carried the potential for significant repercussions, including legal liability, civil action, or professional accountability, should an innovation result in an adverse outcome. This situation created a palpable tension between the senior leadership's push for innovation and the middle management's obligation to maintain the integrity and compliance of existing processes during periods of change. Balancing these competing demands often placed middle managers in a difficult position, where they had to navigate the dual pressures of fostering innovation and mitigating risk.

Practitioners on the front lines, keen to push for changes that could support projects like OE+, were caught between these two forces. They were motivated to innovate and improve services but were constrained by the risk-averse culture that permeated the middle layers of management. Middle managers, for their part, viewed their primary role as ensuring that the processes they managed remained consistent with their design and purpose, which often meant resisting changes that could introduce uncertainty or complexity into an already intricate system.

This paradox was further complicated by the nature of the DA space itself, which was characterised by a high degree of complexity and interdependence. Decisions made within this space must comply with legislative and legal requirements and align with existing policies and processes that span multiple large organisations, including the police, social care, and educational institutions. The fear of unintended consequences, particularly in a domain as sensitive and high-risk as DA, created a significant barrier to innovation. Middle managers were keenly aware that while senior leaders might champion innovation in theory, any misstep in practice—especially one that breached legal protocols or disrupted established procedures—would likely fall on their shoulders.

In this sense, the conceptual space surrounding DA within these organisations was paradoxically both too complex to comprehend fully and too rigid to innovate comfortably. On one hand, the interconnectedness of legal, policy, and procedural frameworks made it difficult for practitioners and middle managers to navigate the potential risks of innovation. On the other hand, there was an undeniable need for localised adaptations and innovations to address the specific challenges and contexts faced by those working directly with DA cases.

This duality created a challenging environment where the pressure to innovate for service improvement was constantly tense with the need to adhere to established processes. Senior



management's broad directives for innovation often overlooked the nuanced realities faced by those responsible for day-to-day operations, leading to a disconnect between the rhetoric of innovation and the practicalities of implementing change within a highly regulated and risk-sensitive domain.

## Children's and Women's Rights and Voice in Policy and Practice

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The findings from our research underscore significant gaps in current approaches to integrating the views and voices of women and children into practice policy and highlight the broader implications for how DA victims—particularly women and children—are perceived and engaged by key institutions like the police, social care, and schools.

Our research revealed that the local implementation of OE was marked by a profound absence of direct engagement with the children and mothers it was designed to support. The policy was structured and implemented in a top-down fashion, prioritising procedural efficiency over participatory inclusivity. Children were often treated as passive intervention recipients rather than active participants. Similarly, mothers were frequently left uninformed and uninvolved in the decisions about their children's welfare, with many never being told that school notifications had been sent out. This lack of engagement was not just an oversight; it reflected deeper, systemic issues in how DA victims were being perceived by the institutions involved in the school notification process. OE+ sought to address some of these deficiencies by adopting a more holistic approach, including post-notification collaboration with families. However, women and children were not consulted or involved in the process of designing, implementing or developing OE+.

The findings from our research suggest that excluding children and mothers from the design and development phases of DA interventions reflects a broader systemic issue: how these populations are perceived by the very systems intended to protect and support them. In both the implementation of OE and OE+, there appeared to be an underlying assumption that children and mothers lacked the capacity to contribute meaningfully to discussions about their own needs and rights. Instead, they were positioned as passive subjects of intervention rather than active agents with valuable insights into their own lives and experiences.

This marginalisation of children's and mothers' voices has significant implications for both the effectiveness and sustainability of innovations like OE and OE+. Interventions designed without input from their intended beneficiaries often fail to fully address the complexities and nuances of individual cases, reducing their overall impact. Furthermore, such innovations are less likely to be embraced or sustained by those they aim to help, as there is no sense of ownership or advocacy from service users.

While OE+ made strides in addressing gaps by fostering post-notification engagement with women and children, its lack of co-production in the early stages of design and policy formulation limited its effectiveness and reach. This exclusion was particularly evident when OE+ ended: there was no push from service users to sustain the initiative. Had co-production been embedded in the

design and implementation of OE+, service users might have become key stakeholders with a vested interest in its continuation. Their advocacy could have influenced the decision to end OE+, potentially leading to a different outcome. This missed opportunity underscores a broader institutional issue: a lack of genuine commitment to participatory processes essential for fostering innovation and long-term sustainability.

## Sustaining or Scaling Innovations

The scalability and sustainability of innovations such as OE and OE+ reveal a complex interplay between simplicity and depth, each with its implications in the context of domestic abuse interventions.

OE was inherently designed with scalability in mind, leveraging its simplicity and low cost to facilitate widespread implementation across diverse regions. The straightforward nature of OE, which centred primarily on the timely notification of schools regarding domestic abuse incidents involving children, allowed for rapid deployment with minimal resources. This uniformity and ease of implementation made OE an attractive option for many local authorities and police forces, requiring little extensive training or infrastructure. As a result, OE could be scaled up quickly, covering vast areas with relative efficiency. However, the very features that made OE easy to implement—its uniformity and low resource requirements—also led to variability in the depth of support provided after notification. While OE offers additional advice and resources to schools to help support children following a notification, our research found that these resources were not fully utilised at the local level in many instances. Despite receiving notifications of DA incidents, schools often felt left alone to manage the aftermath with inconsistent guidance, resources, or support from other agencies.

The reasons for this inconsistent uptake of available support resources from OE were not entirely clear from our interviews. However, it is possible that several factors played a role, including the top-down nature of OE's implementation, the already substantial training demands on teaching staff, and a general reluctance among educators to engage deeply in complex situations without comprehensive support. This suggests that while the OE scheme includes provisions for follow-up, the effectiveness of these provisions may depend heavily on local implementation practices and the capacity or motivation of schools to engage with the resources provided. In contrast, enhanced approaches such as OE+ represent a more supportive approach to school notifications. OE+ sought to move beyond the basic notification model of OE by fostering deep, in-person collaboration between agencies, including police, social care, and schools. This approach aimed to provide tailored, long-term support to children and families, addressing the complex and intergenerational impacts of domestic abuse.

However, OE+'s complexity and resource-intensive nature posed significant challenges to its scalability. The model's success depended on sustained commitment from all involved parties and substantial investments in time, personnel, and continuous management. The high level of coordination required to develop individualised action plans for each case made OE+ more challenging to replicate on a larger scale. Expanding OE+ beyond its initial implementation areas proved too challenging, as the demands on resources and the necessity for ongoing training and robust systems of communication were difficult to achieve across broader regions.

The experiences of OE and OE+ reveal a fundamental tension in the design and implementation of social interventions: the challenge of balancing simplicity with depth. OE was designed with scalability as a core objective, capitalising on its straightforward and low-cost approach to rapidly reach a broad audience. However, as demonstrated in this local context, its simplicity resulted in limited depth, as the locally implemented version of the scheme focused primarily on notifications rather than more comprehensive support. In contrast, OE+ was conceived to address these limitations by offering a more integrated and holistic approach. While this depth allowed for more meaningful support for children and families, it also introduced significant challenges related to resource demands and coordination, making it difficult to scale. This trade-off between depth and scalability is a common dilemma in social interventions. A simple, easily scalable program like OE can achieve widespread reach but may fail to provide the necessary depth for long-term impact in a local context. Conversely, a comprehensive model like OE+ may offer higher quality care but struggle to extend its reach due to resource constraints. The challenge lies in balancing these two approaches—creating a scalable model that delivers meaningful, sustained support.

## Conclusion

Exploring Operation Encompass (OE) and Operation Encompass Plus (OE+) is a useful case study for understanding the broader dynamics of innovation within complex systems, particularly in public sector contexts. While rooted in the specific challenges of addressing domestic abuse, these interventions reveal fundamental insights into the nature of innovation when navigating the intersecting domains of policy, organisational behaviour, and social change.

The tension between standardisation and adaptability often defines the innovation process within complex systems. The contrasting approaches of OE and OE+ illustrate this dynamic. OE's scalable, uniform model provided a coherent framework facilitating broad implementation across diverse contexts. However, this uniformity risked oversimplifying the nuanced realities it sought to address, limiting its effectiveness in responding to local needs. Conversely, OE+ demonstrated the value of adaptability, enabling deeper engagement with local conditions and tailored responses to specific challenges. Yet, this flexibility came at the cost of broader scalability and sustainability, requiring substantial resources and coordination. This dichotomy invites a reconsideration of traditional views on scalability in innovation. Must successful innovation always entail the widespread replication of a single, standardised model? Or should it instead embrace a series of locally tailored interventions grounded in shared principles?

Power and authority also emerged as a critical theme in shaping innovation. OE's top-down design reflected the bureaucratic drive for control, consistency, and risk aversion, which often characterises public sector organisations. While this approach offered predictability and clarity, it sometimes stifled local adaptability and creativity. In contrast, OE+ exemplified a bottom-up approach driven by grassroots practitioners seeking to reclaim agency at the local level. This approach prioritised responsiveness to the complexities of implementation but faced challenges in securing the institutional support and resources necessary for sustainability.

These contrasting approaches raise broader questions about governance and power in complex systems. To what extent should centralised authority dictate innovation in adaptive systems? How

can coherence and oversight be balanced with the imperative for local autonomy and creativity? Addressing these questions is essential for fostering innovation that is both context-sensitive and sustainable, ensuring that interventions can meet the diverse and evolving needs of those they aim to support.

The conceptualisation of key issues—such as domestic abuse—within these interventions highlights the epistemological challenges inherent in innovation. The varied interpretations of domestic abuse by different stakeholders underscore the contested nature of knowledge within complex systems. This raises critical questions about the balance between expert knowledge and lived experience in shaping interventions: who defines the problem, and whose voices are prioritised in designing solutions? The marginalisation of children’s and women’s voices within these interventions illustrates the consequences of failing to include those most directly impacted. Addressing these gaps suggests a need for more inclusive, participatory innovation models where the co-production of knowledge becomes central to the design and implementation process.

The sustainability of innovation in these contexts depends on structural, cultural, and relational factors within organisations. The fragility of OE+, which relied heavily on the advocacy of its champions, exposes the vulnerability of innovations that lack deep institutional embedding. This invites reflection on what is required to sustain meaningful innovation: how can organisations cultivate the cultural and relational supports necessary to transition from episodic projects to sustained, transformative change? How might innovation be nurtured as an ongoing, adaptive process rather than a one-off solution?

The experiences of OE and OE+ reveal the importance of rethinking innovation in complex systems. Innovation should not be seen as a linear process of designing and implementing new solutions but rather as an iterative and dialogic process of negotiation and adaptation within a network of interdependent actors and forces. This perspective calls for a nuanced approach to innovation that embraces complexity, prioritises inclusivity, and acknowledges the situated and contingent nature of transformative change within public sector systems.

## How can you find out more?

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CAFADA has produced several briefings, as well as published research. These can be found here: <https://cafada.stir.ac.uk>

## Suggested citation

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