



## **Written evidence submitted by Dr Sarah Ralph-Lane and Dr Amanda McBride**

Dr Sarah Ralph-Lane (Assistant Professor) and Dr Amanda McBride (Assistant Professor)

Gender, Violence and Abuse Interdisciplinary Research Theme members, Northumbria University

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### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Executive Summary**

1.1(a) As researchers specialising in the intersection of education and domestic abuse (DA), we welcome the opportunity to respond to the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2025. This submission is grounded in our evidence-based research on the critical role schools play in safeguarding and supporting children exposed to domestic abuse.

1.1(b) Our key recommendations are:

- Strengthening Education Settings Involvement in Safeguarding Arrangements
- Mandating Operation Encompass training for all education setting staff to foster a holistic safeguarding approach.
- Embedding high-quality, in-depth training on the impacts of domestic abuse within teacher training.
- Ensuring adequate resources are allocated to education settings to support expanded safeguarding responsibilities.

#### **1.2 Research Team Background and Current Project**

1.2(a) We are researcher members of the Gendered Violence and Abuse Interdisciplinary Research Theme (GVA IDRT) at Northumbria University. The GVA IDRT is

a diverse group of around 100 academics at Northumbria University from across a wide range of disciplines, including criminology, gender studies, public health, law, and creative disciplines, among others. Members have varied backgrounds in academic research, professional practice, policymaking, and activism. Many are involved in volunteering and are on Boards of organisations in the violence against women and girls' sector. We devise effective collaborations with a range of partners to find meaningful solutions to gendered violence and abuse. This includes involving victim-survivors as co-producers of research outputs and centring lived experience as a priority.

1.2(b) Our present research (initiated in May 2024 and ongoing) assesses education settings' use of Operation Encompass report notifications (the police and education early information-sharing partnership) and examines how they implement support for children experiencing domestic abuse.

1.2(c) A pilot project using an in-depth qualitative case study methodology focused on one Operation Encompass primary school in a Metropolitan Borough Local Authority in the North of England was conducted in July 2024, funded by the Department of Social Sciences, Northumbria University.

1.2(d) Data was collected during a two-day school visit using a range of methods including semi-structured interviews with safeguarding staff, workshops with children, observation of the whole school environment/setting, and collection of primary resources (e.g. relevant school documents and anonymised Operation Encompass notifications received by the school).

1.2(e) Preliminary findings from this project were published in the research report ['All Jumbled Up: A Spotlight on teacher and child experience in evaluating Operation Encompass'](#) (Ralph-Lane and McBride 2024).

1.2(f) We have continued this research project through ongoing interviews with staff with safeguarding responsibilities (pastoral managers, designated safeguarding leads, and deputy designated safeguarding leads) at additional education settings across the UK, expanding our research to include secondary schools and post-16 settings.

1.2(g) This written submission draws extensively on the project's findings so far, and both refers to and quotes materials gathered from these interviews.

### 1.3 Research Context and Relevance

1.3(a) While no official source collects data on children affected by domestic abuse, research suggests as many as one in five children (20%) live in a home where there is a perpetrator of domestic abuse present (Radford 2011). This equates to around six

children in an average UK class size of 30 pupils. Children experiencing domestic abuse is therefore a significant proportion of the workload for staff with a safeguarding role in education settings.

1.3(b) Education settings are often the service in closest and longest contact with children and young people experiencing domestic abuse, and so staff can play a crucial role in both identifying and supporting them on a daily basis (Lloyd 2018). Studies of children and young people impacted by domestic abuse found that they valued school staff in helping to identify an abusive context and directing them towards support (Howarth et al 2016). Teachers can be one of the few trusted adults a child might disclose their experiences of domestic abuse to, fulfilling their need for an attuned adult to notice, empathise with, and respond to their emotional distress (Thornton 2014). Teachers being able to respond supportively and maintain a caring, trusting relationship with them can play a vital protective role and improve outcomes (Vaughan-Jensen et al 2020). However, teachers have stated that they have a lack of knowledge, skills and confidence to respond to students experiencing domestic abuse (Davies and Berger 2019). Training about domestic abuse and its impact has been found to be effective in improving teacher confidence in providing support (Ellis 2012; 2018), as has clear guidance, policies and procedures from school leaders (Berger et al 2021).

1.3(c) The responses of education professionals with a safeguarding role from our current research project thus make a significant contribution to policy debates around child protection and safeguarding, the provision of high-quality teacher training, and the adequate resourcing of these practices and provisions.

## **2. Strengthening Education Settings Involvement in Safeguarding Arrangements**

2.1 Our research interviews with safeguarding professionals in a range of UK education settings endorses the notion that these providers should have an increased involvement in safeguarding arrangements for children, and for it to be mandatory for them to be included in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements [Clause 2].

2.2 Respondents in our study echoed the findings of earlier research (Lloyd 2018) that education professionals have more prolonged, direct contact with children than professionals from the statutory safeguarding partners, building ongoing relationships with children – and often their families - over many years, through daily contact. The trust and connection established between education staff and their pupils creates conditions where disclosures of experiencing domestic abuse are of greater likelihood, and alterations in a child's behaviour or presentation more immediately recognised. This is clearly vital to achieving early intervention and enabling vulnerable children to be safeguarded.

2.3 We recognise that safeguarding is necessarily multi-agency, and that practical considerations around the education sector not having the required infrastructure to

allow a single point of accountability through a representative organisation precludes their official involvement as a fourth safeguarding partner. However, education settings exclusion from the current arrangements – and their involvement being only discretionary – was met with bafflement and consternation from our interviewees. One deputy designated safeguarding lead we interviewed (formerly having worked in the police specialising in domestic abuse in VIT, the Vulnerable Investigations Team) expressed definitively that education should be the fourth safeguarding partner, and shared the view that the education sector’s inclusion should be prioritised above some existing partners: *‘Do know what I'd even think? We might even be above health... Then I guess my point for that would be that we have probably seen the children on a more regular basis than the health. Especially with how hard and difficult it is to get GP appointments.’*

2.4 Respondents felt that safeguarding professionals within education – despite the significant role they have to play in early intervention and ongoing support as outlined above – are not sufficiently recognised or respected by other professionals from statutory safeguarding partners. A designated safeguarding lead at a large secondary school offered a germane example of this:

*We've had a connection made between schools and social workers...She used to be a social worker. Now she's a higher up manager, came in to talk to me about social work, how we can best work with each other, but what it ended up being was her basically telling me off about, you know, “don't challenge social workers. Don't say that we can't do this, don't tell us you know better than us”. And it was like, well thought we were here to talk about us working together.... And I was like all for that ‘give me advice’. ‘Give me advice’. ‘Tell me’. And it was like “don't make referrals at 5:00[pm]”. I'm like, well, what if the kid doesn't tell you till 4:30[pm] and then it takes you half an hour to fill the form in?*

2.5 Additionally, we found worrying evidence of education safeguarding professionals being ignored and not being updated on past referrals on safeguarding cases. For example, in relation to a child who a school designated safeguarding team believed was being sexually exploited, a respondent explained: *‘I sent e-mail after e-mail, but you get to the point where you're not going to get any further up the chain unless you go to the Prime Minister and then it just gets silly, doesn't it?’*

2.6 A stronger relationship between children’s social care, police and health services with education, with more integrated information-sharing and procedures, was considered crucial by our interviewees in terms of early intervention for children experiencing domestic abuse and with other vulnerabilities. This is most clearly demonstrated by the consensus of our respondents’ as to the necessity and value of Operation Encompass report notifications to education settings. As a designated safeguarding lead for a large primary school stated:

*‘What [the notification] allowed us to do...this was the child that we got in straight away. [He] went to see our therapeutic counsellor, opened up straight*

*away because I think it was a relief now that people knew that that was happening. He didn't need to tell anybody.'*

### **3. Mandating Operation Encompass training for all education setting staff**

3.1 If “Safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility” - and particularly if the Bill will make it mandatory for education settings to be included in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements - then it follows that high-quality safeguarding training should be a requirement for all education setting staff. Indeed, sector-wide training in key safeguarding issues already has widespread adoption (notably the Prevent duty).

3.2 The general public’s understanding of the scale and impact of domestic abuse (Women’s Aid 2022), and particularly its effect on the lives of children and young people, is mixed. Therefore, it can be surmised that this is also the case for the knowledge of education setting staff (accepting the fact that those with safeguarding roles and responsibilities will have a greater awareness). Interviewees felt that dedicated training for all school staff on domestic abuse and impacts on children, rather than being one component of a wider safeguarding provision, was important to a well-rounded school response to such a significant issue.

3.3 Class teachers but also Teaching Assistants (TAs) often pick up on changes in a child’s presentation first and were centred by our interviewees as being best placed to identify children in need of support. It is for this reason that all school staff at all levels should be trained to recognise and skilfully respond – within the scope of their role – to signs that children might be experiencing domestic abuse.

3.4 This ‘all school staff’ approach should potentially include non-teaching staff, as those in other roles with direct contact with children and young people still require awareness of the impacts of these issues. This is clearly highlighted in this example from a designated safeguarding lead at a post-16 college:

*‘I’ve seen examples like you say in the cafe kind of like, “well, you haven’t got enough money for that sandwich”, like shouting it out loudly sometimes... Just ensuring staff are aware that that can be quite like sensitive and embarrassing in how we might kind of like deal with that situation...They might not have been able to ask for the dinner money that morning because there’s been a domestic incident in the home that previous night. So, it’s just it runs through everything I think, doesn’t it?’*

3.5 The National Operation Encompass ‘Key Adult’ online training is already available for the purpose of helping staff to identify and offer ongoing support to children affected by domestic abuse. This training is a free resource, and is open to all education settings

(including early years' settings and Health Visiting). The Operation Encompass website also includes a wide range of resources for educational settings, including suggestions about what support might look like following a notification. As these resources are already available – and known to education professionals with a safeguarding role – a roll-out to *all* education setting staff could be easily achieved.

#### **4. Embedding high-quality, in-depth training on the impacts of domestic abuse within teacher training.**

4.1 The Bill recognises the key importance of high-quality teaching - achieved by correspondingly high-quality teacher training and statutory induction - to improving outcomes for children [Clause 40]. Our research suggests that there is a great need for quality training to extend beyond purely pedagogical practice; more than ever, teachers are tasked with caring for pupils holistically as supportive, nurturing adults during their childhoods. In the context of a smaller state provision of social care in community settings, the education sector is increasingly required to provide pastoral care far beyond what has previously been the case.

4.2 Respondents felt that teaching staff were not sufficiently prepared for the extent of their safeguarding responsibilities in the contemporary education landscape. There being a lack of sufficient safeguarding training for newly qualified teachers entering the classroom was noted in a number of interviews. This was described as both a paucity of training on the impacts of domestic abuse on children and responding to children experiencing it, but also more broadly in supporting children's diverse mental health and wellbeing needs, including how this might present in terms of challenging behaviour.

4.3 It should be recognised that existing designated safeguarding leads and their deputies have singular expertise relating to the children whose safeguarding they oversee, and they might be considered to be an excellent resource for enhancing teacher training. A current DSL and Pastoral Manager articulated this with a particular recommendation:

*'I think that you should have an experienced DSL go in to universities to talk about their role and what they do, and the actual realities of what they see...some examples of things like case studies of what they've dealt with and what they've seen... because these teachers are coming in to the classroom, having a disclosure and not always knowing what to do.'*

4.4 If the current Bill is looking to amend aspects of the Education Act 2002 in relation to qualifications and statutory induction – and specifically around 'how induction is conducted' - then our research would recommend that high-quality, in-depth training on

the impacts of domestic abuse on children and how it should be responded to is embedded in this provision, with input from current education safeguarding professionals.

## **5. Ensuring adequate resources are allocated to education settings to support expanded safeguarding responsibilities**

5.1 We note that there is little detail in the Bill regarding the resource and funding implications to education settings of the proposed amendments, particularly in relation to the mandatory inclusion of education settings in safeguarding arrangements.

5.2 Our research to date shows that the financial crisis in schools has been compounded by a strained public sector, where referrals to safeguarding partner agencies and services is frequently delayed by many months. A headteacher (and deputy designated safeguarding lead) at a large primary school clearly articulated the funding pressures to all services involved in safeguarding children, and the position that already leaves schools in:

*'The money obviously from government that's going into local authorities is just diminishing as well. They can't support us in the way that we need that support, whether that's money into school or whether that's just additional support teams that they can bring in for us. The money coming from government [to the Local Authority] isn't enough. It's not as much as they used to get. They haven't got the teams. They're having to make cuts themselves...and there isn't the provision out there. A lot of the specialist provisions were closed down years ago, weren't they?'*

5.3 Schools are thus on the 'front line' advocating for children who have seemingly fallen through the cracks in other services, and are in many ways inappropriately focused upon when systems break down. As one interviewee stated: *'We do all of it. We do all of it and you're on the news, being blamed for everything as well.'*

5.4 The essential amendment to the Children's Act 2004 s16E making it mandatory rather than discretionary for education and childcare settings to be involved in safeguarding arrangements will doubtlessly lead to improved outcomes for children experiencing domestic abuse. However, this strengthening of the education sector's role, and therefore responsibility, must be met with appropriate and designated funding from government.

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