

# **Safer Lincolnshire Partnership**

## **DOMESTIC HOMICIDE REVIEW**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Into the deaths of**

**Ellie and Jeff**

**In 2019**

Report Author

Gaynor Mears OBE, MA, BA (Hons), AASW, Dip SW

Report Completed: 21 May 2020

Final

*“There are no words which can adequately express our feelings of loss and the immense gap in our lives without our beautiful daughter.” Ellie’s Mum and Dad.*

*“Jeff was such a wonderful son, kind, thoughtful, generous, very loving and full of fun. My heart aches every day without him”.*  
*Jeff’s Mum.*

The Domestic Homicide Review Panel and the members of the Safer Lincolnshire Partnership Board would like to offer their sincere condolences to both the families who lost their loved ones in the terrible act carried out by the perpetrator which caused their deaths, and which has caused this Review to take place. The two families whose daughter and son were unlawfully killed have been left with a huge gap in their lives, and they are much missed by their many friends.

The family of the person judged to have been responsible for the murders, also receive our condolences. They are in no way responsible for their family member’s actions, and the impact on their lives of his actions needs to be acknowledged.

## CONTENTS

Section		Page
1	The Review Process.....	1
	Contributors to the Review .....	1
	The Review Panel Members .....	2
	The Author of the Overview Report .....	2
	Terms of Reference for the Review .....	3
2	Summary Chronology .....	4
3	Key Issues Arising from the Review .....	6
4	Conclusions .....	7
5	Lessons Learnt .....	8
6	Recommendations .....	8

# DOMESTIC HOMICIDE REVIEW

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **1 The Review Process:**

1.1 This summary outlines the process undertaken by the Safer Lincolnshire Community Safety Partnership Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Panel in reviewing the murders of two residents in their area.

1.2 The following pseudonyms have been chosen by family members for the victims and the perpetrator to protect their identities and those of their family members:

The victims: Ellie was aged 27 years at the time of her murder.  
Jeff was aged 24 years at the time of his murder.

The perpetrator: Zach was aged 32 years at the time of his death.

1.3 There were no criminal proceedings in this case as the perpetrator Zach died in the fatal incident in which Ellie and Jeff were killed. A Coroner's Inquest was held in the autumn of 2019 where the Coroner found that Ellie and Jeff were unlawfully killed, and Zach died by suicide. During evidence to the Coroner, the senior investigating officer stated that had he not died in the fatal incident the police investigation found sufficient evidence to establish that Zach would have been charged with murder had he survived.

1.4 The review process began with an initial meeting of the Safer Lincolnshire Partnership early in 2019 when the decision to hold a domestic homicide review was agreed. All agencies that potentially had contact with the victims prior to their murders, and/or the perpetrator prior to his death, were contacted and asked to confirm whether they were involved with them.

1.5 A total of twenty agencies were contacted. The police and ambulance service were only involved in relation to the fatal incident. Health records were reviewed and found to have either limited information, the content was irrelevant to the review, or in respect of the perpetrator, he had not had contact with a health professional for many years. No other local agencies had records of contact with the parties involved.

#### **Contributors to the Review**

1.6 As mentioned above, the parties to this Review had no contact with agencies other than appointments with their general practitioners. The practices concerned provided a summary of appointments and treatment. No health concerns which could be indicative of, or raise concerns about, domestic abuse were evident. The perpetrator had no contact with the GP with whom he was registered. As a result, the Review Panel agreed there was no necessity to request Individual Management Reviews from any agency. The lack of agency involvement until the fatal incident means this Review has been heavily reliant on the contributions of family and friends, and information from the Coroner's Inquest.

1.7 The Panel is most grateful to the family and friends who have generously given their time to assist with this Review.

## The Review Panel Members

1.8 The following were members of the DHR Panel for this review:

Name	Job Title	Agency Represented
Gaynor Mears	Independent Chair & Report Author	
Clare Tozer	Safeguarding Adults & Children's Lead	Lincolnshire Clinical Commissioning Group
Det Supt Jon McAdam	Head of Protecting Vulnerable Adults Unit	Lincolnshire Police
Danny Moss/Karen Gardner	Group Manager	Lincolnshire Fire & Rescue
Pete Adey	Assistant Chief Officer	National Probation Service
Jane Keenlyside	MARAC/Senior Manager	Edan <sup>1</sup> Lincolnshire
Jade Sullivan	Community Safety Strategy Coordinator	Lincolnshire County Council
Advisors to the Panel		
Toni Geraghty	Assistant Chief Legal Officer	Legal Services Lincolnshire
Teresa Tennant	DHR Administrator	Lincolnshire County Council

The chair would like to express her thanks to the members of the Panel for their thoughtful deliberations, and their contributions to the drafts of the report.

## The Author of the Overview Report

1.9 The chair and report author for this review is an independent DHR chair and consultant Gaynor Mears OBE. The author holds a master's degree in Professional Child Care Practice (Child Protection). During this degree she made a particular study of domestic abuse and its impact, the efficacy of multi-agency working and the community coordinated response to domestic abuse. The author also holds an Advanced Award in Social Work in addition to a Diploma in Social Work qualification, and it was her experiences of cases of domestic abuse as a Children and Families Team senior practitioner which led her to specialise in this subject.

---

<sup>1</sup> EDAN Lincolnshire Domestic Abuse Service (formerly West Lincolnshire Domestic Abuse Service) is a registered charity. The service covers the county of Lincolnshire, and provides support and assistance to women, men and children suffering, or fleeing from domestic abuse.

- 1.10 Gaynor Mears has extensive experience of working in the domestic abuse field both in practice and strategically, including roles as county domestic abuse reduction coordinator; in crime reduction as a community safety manager working with Community Safety Partnerships and across a wide variety of partnerships and agencies; both in the statutory and voluntary sector. She was also regional lead for domestic and sexual violence at the Government Office for the Eastern Region and was a member of a Home Office task group advising areas on the coordinated response to domestic violence. During her time at Government Office she worked on the regional roll-out of IDVA Services, MARAC, Sexual Assault Referral Centres, and Specialist Domestic Violence Courts, supporting Partnerships with their implementation. As an independent consultant Gaynor Mears has undertaken research and evaluations into domestic abuse services and best practice, and since DHRs were introduced in 2011 she has undertaken DHR chair's training and completed a large number of reviews. She has also served as a trustee of a charity delivering community perpetrator programmes. Gaynor Mears meets the requirements for a DHR chair as set out in DHR Statutory Guidance 2016 Section 4(39) both in terms of training, knowledge, and the experience required for the role. She has not been employed by, and is independent of, any agencies in Lincolnshire.

### **Terms of Reference for the Review**

- 1.11 **Statutory Guidance Section 2(7) states the purpose of the Review is to:**

- Establish what lessons are to be learned from the domestic homicide regarding the way in which local professionals and organisations work individually and together to safeguard victims.
- Identify clearly what those lessons are both within and between agencies, how and within what timescales they will be acted on, and what is expected to change as a result.
- Apply these lessons to service responses including changes to policies and procedures as appropriate; and
- Prevent domestic violence homicide and improve service responses for all domestic violence victims and their children through improved intra and inter-agency working.
- Contribute to a better understanding of the nature of domestic violence and abuse; and
- Highlight good practice.

### **Specific Terms of Reference for the Review:**

- 1) To describe and analyse the events which led up to the fatal incident commencing from May 2018 when it is understood the relationship between the female victim and the deceased perpetrator commenced. Any background information before this date which has relevance or will bring context to the review will also be included.
- 2) To examine whether there is anything in the perpetrator's background which might explain his character and his behaviour which led to the fatal incident from which the review can learn to prevent similar murders. (question asked by family)
- 3) To attempt to explore whether there is any evidence or information which may indicate that there was coercive or controlling behaviour or abuse in the relationship.
- 4) If there is any indication that the victim who was previously in a relationship with the perpetrator was concerned about the perpetrator's behaviour, were there any barriers to her seeking help and support?

- 5) Are messages raising awareness about domestic abuse and coercive control adequately distributed, and are local support services widely publicised in public spaces?

**Panel Statement:**

The Panel would like to emphasize their gratitude to the family and friends who have contributed to the review. The information within this report would not have been possible without their help. The author and Panel have endeavoured to represent their views and opinions as they expressed them, and this has helpfully illuminated how events have been interpreted or rationalised by them, as opposed to being interpreted through the eyes of services or practitioners.

## **2. Summary Chronology:**

- 2.1 Neither Ellie nor Jeff, the two victims in this review, nor Zach, the perpetrator, were known to agencies before the fatal event with the exception being their GP practices. However, as stated previously there was nothing of relevance in GP records, therefore, this chronology has been reliant on the contributions of family and friends.
- 2.2 Ellie and Jeff had been in a relationship for approximately 4 years when they parted. Following their separation, Ellie took a job in Peterborough in May 2018 for a delivery company, and it was here that she first met Zach who was responsible for training new drivers. At some time during the summer of 2018 Zach was approached to go to a branch of the company in the Luton area to recruit and manage drivers and Ellie moved there with him. This role would mean that Zach would be determining Ellie's delivery routes. They stayed in Zach's brother's home in the area. In September or October 2018 one of Ellie's friends received a message saying, "life's got a bit weird; moved to Luton for work". Unusually for Ellie, she did not tell her friends about Zach and they never met him.
- 2.3 When Ellie's family first met Zach, they liked him because he wanted to take care of her. They knew little about him other than Ellie telling them that he had been in a relationship before when he worked on a farm, and when this broke down, he had suddenly left his job of 15 years and gone travelling. This is at variance with information provided by Zach's brother for the Inquest, and that given to the chair by his sister; they reported that Ellie was Zach's first real relationship. Although they had been together for only a short time, they started planning a future possibly on a farm, but Ellie's parents thought Zach was trying too hard. For example, one day Ellie said she wanted a laptop and the following day Zach bought one for her. Her parents thought his actions were 'over the top'. Ellie once told her mother "he's all over me, I can't breathe".
- 2.4 Zach's sister informed the chair that they had a difficult childhood. She reported that an aunt told her that their mother had been brought up in care. Their father left the family home when Zach, the youngest of 5 children was 4 months old. His sister added that Zach went to live with his father for a short time when very young, but he was returned to live with his mother and siblings. Zach's sister told the review chair that Social Services were involved with the family for a period of time. The experiences described by Zach's sister suggest that Social Services involvement may have been due to neglect and possibly emotional and physical abuse. She reported that they missed a great deal of school as children, and around the age of 11 or 12 years Zach would shoplift vodka and drink. Inquiries were made of the area in which the family grew up, however due to the

number of years which have past no record of Social Services involvement with the family could be located by the local authority. When he was 14 years old Police records show that he was among 8 juveniles given a final warning by police for harassment and damage. Zach's sister maintains that she and Zach were treated differently from their siblings and she became like a mother to Zach; she found him his first job and he stayed with her when he returned from travelling.

- 2.5 In the late autumn of 2018 Ellie's mother recalls that Ellie bought Zach a birthday and Christmas present, but when they arrived to spend Christmas with Ellie's family, her mother noticed a change in her behaviour towards Zach; she was very distant towards him. Her mother thought she was going through with the visit as she did not want to spoil Christmas for her family. Zach's sister reported to the chair that when the couple visited her before Christmas, she had noticed that Ellie seemed distant and she had told Zach's sister that she was depressed. There is no record of Ellie seeing her GP in this connection.
- 2.6 After Christmas Ellie and Zach returned to Luton, and Ellie's mother understands that Ellie ended their relationship very soon afterwards and returned to Lincolnshire the same night. Ellie telephoned her parents and appeared to be taken aback by the impact the break-up had on Zach. In his statement for the Inquest Zach's brother reported that Zach appeared to be very upset; he asked his employer for time off and left his brother's house carrying a bag.
- 2.7 One of Ellie's housemates confirmed at the Inquest that Ellie had received several phone calls from Zach after she returned from Luton and Ellie told her that Zach had 'gone off the rails and given up his job'. The housemate was aware that Ellie had been unhappy in the relationship and that she had rekindled her relationship with Jeff at the beginning of December.
- 2.8 From the police investigation it was revealed that in the lead up to the fatal incident Zach's movements were:
- 10:30hrs Zach left his brother's house carrying a rectangular object in a bag.
  - 11:22hrs he hired a transit van costing £338 and drove to Peterborough (this sum indicates the rental was for more than a few days: hire costs range from £20 to £30 per day).
  - Purchases a jerry can, camping stove, matches, binoculars, fishing line, battery, torch, lock knife, and £85 hunting knife, totalling £253.
  - 17:00hrs Zach bought petrol for the jerry can (the van was fuelled by diesel).
  - 01:19hrs he purchased a parking ticket in Ellie's home town.
  - 01:20hrs Zach is seen on CCTV walking around the town looking in venues suggesting he was searching for someone.
  - 01:33hrs he left the town and drove to the road in which Ellie's house was located.
  - 02:00hrs a nearby resident noticed the van parked in the street. The lights are turned off as he approaches.
- 2.9 Ellie and Jeff returned to her home in the early hours of the morning, and after seeing one of her housemates they went to her room. Soon after the housemate heard shouting, banging and screaming and went to Ellie's room and knocked on the door. Zach appeared at the door pointing a knife; a second housemate came out of her room and pulled the other housemate away. Zach shut the door. Ellie could be heard saying "let me out; stop hitting me". The second housemate tried to kick the door, shouting to be let me in whilst phoning the police at the same time, but the door was locked. More shouting and screaming was heard, then the smell of fuel quickly followed by fire igniting under

the door; two seconds later an explosion shook the house. The house was quickly ablaze. Fortunately, the housemates were rescued by neighbours before the fire service arrived.

2.10 During police inquiries Zach's laptop was examined and the following web searches which had taken place shortly after Ellie left were identified:

- Checking on local car hire companies
- How to track people by their mobile phone
- How to read your girlfriend's WhatsApp messages
- Checks of Ellie's Facebook profile
- Vehicle telematics relating to vehicle tracking
- Images of the house where Ellie lived
- What can happen if you breathe too much gas?
- Natural accelerants

2.11 The Inquest heard that during police examination of Zach's room in Luton two pieces of notepaper were found on the floor on which was written the phrases "I HOPE EVERYONE IN THIS PLANET D" and "ALSO F\*\*\* THAT BITCH". It is not possible to confirm the origin of the messages. No analysis of mobile phones was possible due to damage sustained in the fire. Analysis of the party's public facing social media accounts revealed no content which concerned their relationship or could be relevant to domestic abuse. Zach was said not to use social media.

### 3. Key Issues Arising from the Review:

3.1 The relationship between Ellie and Zach was of a short duration. It appears that it was Zach's first real relationship and he was described as besotted by Ellie; on his side the relationship was intense from the start. He would often buy Ellie gifts; she only had to mention something, be that a new laptop or takeaway meal, and Zach would immediately buy it for her. However, Ellie found the relationship 'smothering'; she told her mother "he's all over me; I can't breathe". She also told a friend that Zach was "smothering" and "too possessive" and she no longer wanted to be with him. This suggests that Zach may have become controlling and this was not the relationship Ellie wanted.

3.2 The most common trigger for homicide in an abusive relationship is separation, and risk is heightened when the abuser is highly controlling in addition to being violent<sup>2</sup>. The end of the relationship equals a loss of the control. Whilst there was no known evidence of violence from Zach, when Ellie ended their relationship towards the end of 2018, Zach was extremely upset and he reacted to the separation well outside the parameters of what might be expected. He took steps in a planned and deliberate manner to take retribution against Ellie in an extremely violent manner. Thus, this case confirms the rationale for separation as a high-risk factor and as a key component in the DASH risk assessment<sup>3</sup> tool for assessing risk in domestic abuse cases.

3.3 Almost Immediately after Ellie left to return to her former home Zach appears to have begun making plans. During the police investigation examination of his laptop it revealed evidence that he was looking into means of digitally stalking of Ellie. This included online

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid and Stark E (2007) *Coercive Control, How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, New York, Oxford University Press

<sup>3</sup> Domestic Abuse, Stalking, and Harassment - An evidence-based risk assessment tool used in addition to professional judgement to assess risks faced by victims of domestic abuse.

intrusion into Ellie's social media and communications, through to tracking devices for vehicles.

- 3.4 Zach's upbringing as described by his sister suggests a difficult childhood which may have been neglectful and abusive. Such adverse childhood experiences could have resulted in problems with attachment and adult relationships, however, many adults with similar backgrounds do not go on to commit such violent acts. For some adults affected by attachment problems in their childhood there can be a need to be emotionally close, but as Howe et al highlight the feeling of being dependent on someone who may hurt and abandon you can be fraught with feelings of anxiety and loss; as a result separation and abandonment are constant fears.<sup>4</sup> This can lead to relationships which are characterised by conflict, jealousy, possessiveness and uncertainty; it is not unusual for these feelings to lead male partners to be very possessive, and the other person to abandon the relationship,<sup>5</sup> as indeed Ellie did. This may be one explanation for Ellie's reports of feeling 'smothered' in the relationship with Zach, and why, as well as being inexperienced in relationships, Zach was so intent on pleasing Ellie by buying her gifts and being over attentive.
- 3.5 There is no evidence to suggest that Ellie fully appreciated what coercive control was, but she appears to have instinctively felt that the 'smothered' feeling she experienced with Zach was not right, and not for right for her; so she ended the relationship. Ellie could not have known that Zach would experience this as an intolerable rejection with such devastating results. His sister suggested to the review chair that Zach lost control, but loss of personal control can also be interpreted as a loss of control of a partner or of a relationship. Separation is known to be one of the highest risk triggers in domestic abuse homicides, and the often-quoted attitude "If I can't have you, no-one can"<sup>6</sup> is a frequent mindset of perpetrators.

#### 4. Conclusions:

- 4.1 The tragic murders of Ellie and Jeff was a terrible shock to all those who knew and loved them. It was inexplicable that someone whom Ellie had known for such a relatively short time, and whom her friends had not even met, could commit such a terrible crime.
- 4.2 Police inquiries and the Inquest revealed the planning which Zach had undertaken to carry out the terrible crime very soon after Ellie ended the relationship. At any time on the journey from Luton to Lincolnshire he could have stopped and turned back, but he did not.
- 4.3 Relevant research suggests that the perpetrator's sister's suggestions of their adverse childhood experiences of neglect and abuse may have had a negative impact on his adult life and affected his adult relationships. This includes insecurity around relationships with others, fears of abandonment, and possessiveness. Conflict and aggressions on one hand, and acts of exaggerated generosity on the other can be a factor in such relationships.
- 4.4 There are hints from the limited sources of information presented in the review that Zach was possessive and overbearing in his relationship with Ellie and that she found this to have a 'smothering' effect on her. Whether Zach's behaviour was because he was

---

<sup>4</sup> Howe D et al (1999) *Attachment Theory, Child Maltreatment and Family Support: A Practice and Assessment Model*. Macmillan, Basingstoke

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> Monkton-Smith J (2019) *Intimate Partner Femicide: Using Foucauldian Analysis to Track an Eight Stage Progression to Homicide*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1077801219863876>. Accessed 29.1.20

besotted with Ellie and trying too hard to gain her affection; whether there was a more malevolent intent on possessing and controlling her; or his childhood abuse reported by his sister distorted his view of a healthy relationship, it is not possible to draw a firm conclusion. However, Zach's final actions were violent and devastating in the extreme.

- 4.5 This is an unusual review in that apart from minimal medical records which held no relevant information to the case, no other agencies or services had contact with the victims or the perpetrator. This has led to a lack of agency information frequently available to reviews from which evidence can be drawn to inform lessons to learn.

## 5. Lessons to be learnt

- 5.1 Ellie appears to have instinctively felt that what she described as a 'smothering' relationship with Zach was not for her and she left. She did not appreciate that separation can be the most high-risk time in some cases when leaving someone who felt so intensely about her as Zach appears to have done. Behaviours within relationships such as those described in this review i.e. over attentiveness and possessiveness, may take place in varying degrees without spilling over into the violence seen here. However, whilst not wishing to generate unfounded anxiety in relationships, there is a case to be made that wider publicity is needed to increase the awareness of coercive and controlling behaviours, not just for victims, but also family, friends, and the wider population.
- 5.2 This review has reinforced the reason why separation is among the triggers which form the high-risk factors in domestic abuse risk assessment tools. However, no occasion arose for any agency to undertake a risk assessment in this case.
- 5.3 The review confirms what many professionals already know that where adverse childhood experiences may have occurred, this can in some instances impact on adult future relationships. This highlights the importance of early support and intervention for children and families to mitigate such damaging experiences.

## 6. Recommendations

- 6.1. In relation to the lesson identified above at paragraph 5.1, the Panel discussed the necessity for a recommendation regarding public awareness campaigns as this has already been a recommendation of a previous review.<sup>7</sup> In response to that recommendation, the local area has already put in place a strategic communications plan to raise public awareness. Nevertheless, given that it is 3 years since the previous review it is appropriate that, in recognition of this review, a further recommendation is made to reinforce the importance of the local strategy and the need for it to continue.

### **Recommendation 1:**

That the countywide strategic communications plan continues to raise public awareness of domestic abuse, coercive control, and the high-risk triggers for serious harm of separation and all types of stalking including via of social media.

- 6.2. Agencies were not involved with the victims or the perpetrator, therefore recommendations for change are not required in this instance. However, as this review accentuates the importance of recognising separation as a high-risk time in such

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk/downloads/file/1285/dhr-claire-and-charlotte-hart>

relationships as discussed in this report, notably those which appear to be intense and possessive in nature; it would be helpful for this case to be used within domestic abuse training throughout the county to reinforce the risk even in relationships of short duration.

- 6.3. The perpetrator had no contact with agencies in Lincolnshire; indeed, he had never lived in the county. Therefore, in respect of the third lesson learnt at paragraph 5.3 concerning early support for children facing adverse childhood experiences as a preventative measure against difficulties in adulthood, there is no evidence to justify a recommendation for Lincolnshire's services. However, it is hoped that by using the contents of this review in training the efficacy of early intervention will be noted and influence future policies and practice.

**Recommendation 2:**

The content and learning within this review should be used to inform domestic abuse training within the county to reinforce separation as a high-risk trigger for serious harm. This should include recognition of the fact that a relationship of short duration does not diminish the seriousness of the risk. The training should also emphasise the importance of early intervention to protect children from future harm, and to reduce the risk of adverse impact on their relationships in adulthood.