

# Cardiff Public Services Board



## Domestic Homicide Review - Executive Summary

'Sarah'

Murdered: September 2017

Review & Investigation

*Paul Johnston – Chair and report author  
December 2019*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This summary outlines the process undertaken by the Cardiff Public Services Board (PSB) domestic homicide review panel in reviewing the murder of Sarah (not her real name) who was resident in their area.
- 1.2 Sarah was murdered by her partner, Adult A. She had known him for less than two-months, but she never knew his real name or how old he was. They had met through an internet dating website in late July 2017 on which Adult A had registered using a false name and date of birth.
- 1.3 On the day that Sarah died and while she and Adult A had been socialising with friends, Adult A accused her of seeing another man. They argued, with Sarah saying that she was not seeing anybody else. The last time Sarah's friends saw her was when they dropped both of them off at Sarah's house after the argument. During that evening, Adult A stabbed Sarah to death.
- 1.4 Adult A later pleaded guilty to Sarah's murder and was sentenced to life imprisonment with a recommendation that he serves 18-years before he can be considered for parole. In sentencing him, the Judge said..." *Using a false name, you formed a relationship, but the messages passed between you showed you were jealous and controlling... In the short time [Sarah] knew you, you used physical violence towards her... You then tried to form sexual relationships with other women on Facebook - you decided you had nothing to lose... You are determined, calculating, self-centred and very dangerous. Your behaviour after the killing shows a complete absence of remorse.*"
- 1.5 In line with agreed protocols the police notified the PSB of the circumstances of Sarah's murder because she had been unlawfully killed by someone with whom she had been in an intimate relationship. The Partnership subsequently commissioned the review which began in August 2018 and concluded in December 2019. The PSB acknowledges that the review took longer to complete than usual, but the delay was due to a combination of attempts to source additional information and to staff turnover within Community Safety at Cardiff Council. Additional time was also required after the overview report was written to allow for Sarah's mother to comment upon it, which was further delayed because of restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore Sarah's mother has requested sight of the final report before publication which will take place at the earliest opportunity. The dissemination of lessons learned from the review was not adversely affected by the delays.

## 2. CONTRIBUTORS TO THE REVIEW

- 2.1 Sarah's mother fully participated in the review. She and the chair met personally on two occasions and numerous telephone conversations between them also took place during the review process. The review chair had brief telephone conversations with two of Sarah's friends, but neither felt emotionally able to meet personally or to

contribute to the review. None of Adult A’s known friends responded to requests by the review chair to participate, but Sarah’s employer did take part, although because Sarah had not worked there very long, they were unable to add anything of significance to the review.

2.2 The review chair wrote to Adult A in prison to ask whether he would be prepared to participate in the review, but he did not respond to the letter.

2.3 The following agencies participated in the review. Their report authors were independent in that they had no previous involvement with Sarah or with Adult A or any line-management responsibility for staff that had been involved with them.

- South Wales Police
- Cardiff and Vale University Health Board
- Cardiff Social Services
- Cardiff Council Housing Services

2.4 The Cardiff PSB appointed Paul Johnston to chair the review and author the overview report. He was not associated with any of the agencies involved in the review. The review panel, who were also completely independent, consisted of the following:

Paul Johnston	Independent chair and report author
Stephanie Kendrick-Doyle	Housing & Communities - Cardiff Council
Alison Jones	Interim Community Safety Manager – Cardiff Council
Beth Aynsley	South Wales Police - Independent Protecting Vulnerable Person Manager
Natalie Southgate	Improvement Project Manager, Gender Specific Services – Cardiff Council
Alys Jones	Operational Manager, Safeguarding - Social Services, Children Services - Cardiff Council
Nicola Jones	Domestic Abuse Co-ordinator – Cardiff Council
Linda Hughes-Jones	Head of Safeguarding - Cardiff and Vale University Health Board
Nikki Harvey	Named Professional Safeguarding - Welsh Ambulance Service NHS Trust
Chris Fox	Senior Social Lettings Unit Manager (Social Inclusion) – Cardiff Council

### 3. TERMS OF REFERENCE AND SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

3.1 The review examined the involvement of each agency with Sarah and with Adult A between January 2013 and September 2017. Although they had known one another for less than two-months, both had been involved with agencies previously, albeit for very different reasons, hence the decision to extend the timescale of the review to explore whether there was any learning for agencies in the period before they met.

3.2 The terms of reference were set to examine:

- *Whether the incident in which Sarah died was a single incident or whether there were any warning signs and whether more could be done to raise awareness of services available to victims of domestic abuse*
- *Whether there were any barriers experienced by Sarah's family/friends/colleagues in reporting any abuse in Cardiff or elsewhere, including whether they knew how to report domestic abuse should they have wanted to*
- *Whether Sarah had disclosed abuse while at work and what support/policies and procedures are available for staff at her workplace*
- *Whether Sarah had experienced abuse in previous relationships in Cardiff or elsewhere, and whether this experience impacted on her likelihood of seeking support in the months before she died*
- *Whether there were opportunities for professionals to 'routinely enquire' as to any domestic abuse experienced by Sarah that were missed*
- *Whether Adult A had any previous history of abusive behaviour to an intimate partner, a relative or a co-habitee and whether this was known to any agencies*
- *Whether there were opportunities for agency intervention in relation to domestic abuse regarding Sarah and Adult A that were missed*
- *Whether any training or awareness raising requirements are-necessary to ensure a greater knowledge and understanding of domestic abuse processes and/or services in the region*
- *Whether it is possible to raise awareness of the dangers posed by using online dating sites where no vetting is undertaken.*

#### 4. BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

##### 4.1 Adult A

Adult A was not from the Cardiff area, having moved there in September 2016. Under his real name, he had a long list of previous convictions in various parts of England, many of which involved violence towards women, including intimate partners (between 2003 and 2006). He had served several terms of imprisonment and was last released from custody in 2015. He was not known to South Wales Police (or any other agency in the South Wales Police area) in that context though, in fact very little was known about him. As no one was aware of the relationship between him and Sarah, there was little opportunity to discover he was using a false name.

4.2 It is now known that in January 2016, Adult A (using his real name) met a woman from the Gwent area of Wales through the same online dating website he later used to meet Sarah. They began a relationship, but it soon ended because the woman suspected he had been lying to her. For several weeks thereafter, Adult A sent the woman a series of extremely unpleasant and threatening text messages. The woman reported what had happened to Gwent Police who made attempts to locate Adult A, but without success.

4.3 Research after Sarah's murder revealed that very similar circumstances had occurred many years previously. Under his real name, he had been so overbearing and controlling of his female partner that she ended the relationship. He became aggressive and was irrationally fixated that she was seeing another man. He would not listen to reason and eventually he lost his temper and made chilling threats to kill her.

#### 4.4 Sarah

Sarah was described a lovely, intelligent, gentle and kind person who was fiercely independent and strong willed. According to her mother and some of her friends, Sarah had a tendency to be overly trusting of people sometimes and she was also quite impressionable; they say that above anything else, Sarah really wanted to be liked and to have friends, to be in a stable relationship and to have a steady full-time job.

4.5 Although Sarah's mother knew that Sarah and Adult A had been together for only two months, she had no idea until after Sarah's murder that they had met through a dating website or even that Sarah had been using the internet to meet people. She said she could fully understand why her daughter would be drawn to that medium however, because she tended to become a little embarrassed or awkward when meeting people for the first time.

4.6 Sarah's mother met Adult A on a few occasions, but Sarah never disclosed anything to her to shed him in a bad light. She added that Sarah was clearly very fond of Adult A, even though they had not been together very long. She added that on one occasion she had noticed a bruise on Sarah's arm, but when she asked her about it, Sarah had said she had bumped into a door frame. Only a few-days before Sarah's murder, Sarah and her mother went abroad on holiday. Sarah had a ring on her finger that her mother had not seen before and when she asked Sarah about it, all she said was that it was not an engagement ring (according to Sarah's friends, she and Adult A had become engaged to be married within a week of meeting. Sarah's mother had not known about it until after Sarah's murder). Sarah had taken her mobile phone on holiday with her, but it broke while they were away, so she used her mother's mobile phone. During the week they were away, Adult A sent in the region of 400-text messages to Sarah's mother's phone. Her recollection of the messages is that they were inconsistent and incoherent, for example, one would say something on the lines of, *'I'm missing you and can't wait to see you'* which was immediately followed by

*'Take your time when you get back'*. Then, completely randomly, Adult A sent text messages accusing Sarah of having an affair with one of the waiters at the resort. (There was no truth behind the allegations).

- 4.7 The only people who did know of Adult A's true identity (and probably at least some of his offending history), were some of Adult A's friends who actually met Sarah through him. None of them accepted invitations to participate in the review and it remains a mystery as to what they knew about the relationship and of Adult A's motives in obscuring his true identity.
- 4.8 About a month before Sarah's murder, a long-term member of her friendship group sent a group text message to the effect that he was going to be in Cardiff the following month, suggesting they should all meet up. The friend received a text message back from Sarah's phone (which was almost certainly typed by Adult A) saying that Sarah had a boyfriend and that she loved him very much. As mentioned previously, on the day that Sarah died, she and Adult A had been out socialising with other friends when Adult A accused her of seeing another man. Sarah professed her innocence saying she was not seeing anybody else (which was the truth), but an argument ensued, and Sarah's friends dropped both of them off at Sarah's house. It was during that evening that Adult A murdered Sarah.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 Sarah never knew who Adult A really was or what he was capable of. The reality was that he was a serial stalker and perpetrator of domestic abuse with an offending profile stretching back many years. No one (with the possible exception of some of his friends) knew his real identity. No agency was aware he was using a false name or that he and Sarah were in a relationship.
- 5.2 Adult A had been a violent criminal for many years (to both men and to women), with some of his offending being committed against female partners. His offending took place across England and at the time of meeting Sarah through to the time of her murder, he was not subject to any Court Orders or Licence conditions. Even if had not lied to Sarah about his true identity, the likelihood is that agencies would not have known they were together.
- 5.3 Thousands of people meet via dating websites and in the vast majority of cases the participants have no ulterior motives. Adult A created a fictitious profile, but no one knows whether Sarah had any suspicions about it or if she did, whether she was aware of the risks involved and what she could have done to authenticate the information she was being presented with.
- 5.4 It is not possible to say for sure whether Sarah's desire to have friends and to be in a stable relationship outweighed any inclination she may have had either to disclose abuse by Adult A or to scrutinise what he told her about himself. It is highly probable that Adult A's motive for lying about his identity and background was predatory from the outset and was designed to entrap an unsuspecting victim. Only a matter of

months beforehand and using his real name, he had entered into at least one other relationship with a woman he had met on the dating website. That had ended abruptly because she had thought he had been telling lies about himself. Adult A clearly had difficulty accepting it and he resorted to sending abusive and threatening text messages and offering violence to the person he imagined to be the woman's new partner. That behaviour mirrored what had happened many years previously with a previous intimate partner.

## 6. AGENCY KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- 6.1 Opportunities were missed by Sarah's GP during consultations in May and in August 2017 to make routine enquiry about domestic abuse. It is unlikely that Sarah had met Adult A by May 2017, but certainly she was in a relationship with him in August when she made the disclosure to the GP that she thought she might be pregnant. There is no evidence that Sarah's relationship status was explored during either consultation, but even if it had been and had Sarah been comfortable in discussing it, she would unwittingly have given the GP false information about her boyfriend's identity. This may or may not have led to Sarah finding out his true identity.
- 6.2 The review has highlighted the apparent ease at which Adult A was able to lie about his true identity, to sustain the lie and ultimately to take advantage of Sarah.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.1 GENERIC

- 7.2 ➤ That an awareness raising campaign should be delivered, aimed at the general public, about what constitutes coercive and controlling behaviour and how to recognise it. It should include the provision of practical advice to anyone who has a suspicion that either they or someone they know may be a victim and how support options can be identified and accessed.
- 7.3 ➤ That a national review of completed domestic homicide reviews (and other publications) be commissioned to determine the extent to which dating websites feature in background circumstances of cases, to enable consideration to be given to what advice, if any, may be provided to dating website users about their own safety.

7.4 The agencies with case-specific recommendations were:

### 7.5 CARDIFF AND VALE UNIVERSITY HEALTH BOARD

- 7.6 ➤ That all health staff/GP'S should undertake mandatory Group 1 Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence training to ensure they are able to target victims of domestic abuse and to provide assurance that the University Health Board is meeting the needs of victims.



- That the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence training will consider the impact of social media and dating websites
- That health staff should enquire and document the relationship status and the name of a victim's partner through the 'Ask and Act' process
- That appropriate staff groups within the University Health Board should attend Group 2 Domestic Abuse Training under the Welsh Government National Training Framework.

7.7 **CARDIFF COUNCIL HOUSING SERVICES**

- 7.8
- That staff are reminded of the requirement to record violent incidents on their ALERT risk database.