**LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS**

**COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP**

**DOMESTIC HOMICIDE REVIEW**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**‘ZAHRA’ AGED 25**

**KILLED IN TOWER HAMLETS IN OCTOBER 2018**

**REVIEW PANEL CHAIR AND REPORT AUTHOR**

**BILL GRIFFITHS CBE BEM QPM**

**FEBRUARY 2021**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### The Review Process

This summary outlines the process of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH) Community Safety Partnership (CSP) Chair’s decision to establish a Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Panel in November 2018 under s9 Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004, independently chaired by Bill Griffiths CBE BEM QPM, to review the homicide in Tower Hamlets of ‘Zahra’[[1]](#footnote-1) aged 25, caused by beating and strangulation in October 2018, that had been inflicted by her second husband, ‘Karan’ aged 32, who was convicted of her murder in March 2019 and sentenced to 26 years imprisonment.

The process began with a meeting in February 2019 of all agencies that potentially had contact with those involved prior to the death of Zahra. The Panel met on five occasions and robustly discussed the findings from the IMRs the Chair’s drafts of the overview, agreeing the final version by email. The process ended when the Tower Hamlets CSP Board approved a final version of the DHR report at a meeting in March 2020, approved and submitted to the Home Office Quality Assurance Panel. Home Office feedback was responded to and the final version submitted in February 2021.

### Contributors to the review

Agency representatives on the Panel and participating in the review were:

* Sarah Murphy, Joint Senior Strategic Safeguarding Adults Lead in the Local Authority and Clinical Commissioning Groups for the Local GP Practice for the family\*
* Ruth Walters GP Care Group CIC fir the Health Visiting and School Health Service (Tower Hamlets GP Care Group)\*
* Samantha Spillane Head of Safeguarding for Barts Health NHS Trust\*
* Lisa Matthews, Service Manager, LBTH Adult Social Care for LBTH Adult Social Care
* Menara Ahmed, LBTH Senior VAWG and Hate Crime Manager for LBTH Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Team
* Geraldine O’Donnell, Service Manager of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service, LBTH Children and Culture Directorate for LBTH Children’s Social Care (CSC)\*
* Rafiqul Hoque, Head of Service, LBTH Housing Options Service (HOS) for LBTH Housing Options\*
* Andrew Nowakowski, Tenancy Specialist Manager for Clarion Housing (Registered Providers of Social Housing – RPSH)\*
* John Macdonald, Review Officer, Specialist Crime Review Group for Metropolitan Police Service (MPS)+

Specialist domestic abuse advice was provided by:

* Dina Sahmanovic, London East Operations Manager for Victim Support London

(\*agency provided an Individual Management Review (IMR) +MPS provided a letter)

Agencies and local voluntary organisations in Tower Hamlets were asked to give chronological accounts of their contact with Zahra, Karan, their child, Child B, and Child A, Zahra’s child with her first husband, Hasan. Based on an integrated chronology from 2013 to the time of the homicide, IMRs were provided by the agencies noted above and discussed by the Panel. The Panel were satisfied that the IMR/letter was undertaken by a senior manager not connected with the events being reported upon.

The Chair met with Zahra’s mother, sister and uncle at the trial in March 2019. The Home Office family information leaflets were provided and attention drawn to the advocacy services available. The ToR were discussed and no additions were required. They kindly provided a photograph of Zahra to assist the Panel. Through the Chair, the Panel have offered heartfelt condolences upon their loss. A follow up meeting with those family members was held in August that provided helpful insights into Zahra’s life and the circumstances prior to her death. Sister Aleena has provided further insights by telephone with the Chair and was given the third version of the overview for comment. Karan did not respond to a request to participate in the review.

### Author of the overview report

Bill Griffiths is also the author of the overview report. He is a former police officer who has had no operational involvement in LB Tower Hamlets. He has been appointed as the independent Chair of the DHR Panel having had no involvement in policing since retirement from service in 2010. Since 2013, he has been involved in more than twenty DHRs.

### Terms of Reference (ToR) for the review

ToR were agreed at the first Panel meeting and also shared with family members. They set out the methodology for the review, the operating principles and the wider Government definition of domestic abuse, including controlling and coercive behaviour. The main lines of Inquiry were:

1. Scope of review agreed from January 2013 to date of homicide (following Panel debate initially set at five years) with any earlier event of significance to be included
2. Identify relevant equality and diversity considerations, including Adult and Children Safeguarding issues
3. Establish whether family, friends or colleagues want to participate in the review. If so, to ascertain whether they were aware of any abusive behaviour to the victim prior to the homicide (any disclosure; not time limited). In relation to the family members, whether they were aware if any abuse and of any barriers experienced in reporting abuse, or best practice that facilitated reporting it
4. Take account of previous lessons learned in LB Tower Hamlets
5. Identify how people in the LB of Tower Hamlets gain access to advice on sexual and domestic abuse whether themselves subject of abuse or known to be happening to a friend, relative or work colleague.

### Summary chronology

Family information

Zahra was of Bangladeshi heritage and Sunni Muslim faith and was born in the UK in 1993. She did well at her local school and College where she took a course in childcare. She found employment in a nursery where she worked until taking maternity leave. On return she became a teaching assistant at a local Primary School.

She was aged 18 when she married Hasan and she gave birth to Child A in January 2013. Her family were not impressed by him but supported her decision to marry a man of her choice. They set up home in Hayes. Zarah’s family revealed that Hasan held an older fashioned view of marriage and he began to ‘discipline’ her, including by beating. The marriage soon broke down due to persistent domestic abuse, including for part of her pregnancy, and Zahra returned to her parents’ home with Child A. She took out a Non-Molestation Order (NMO).

Zahra wanted to be married again to provide a father figure for her daughter and in December 2014, she chose to meet Karan. The original proposal was to date for two years and then decide about marriage. Karan is a Bangladeshi national and he disclosed he had “visa issues” to be resolved so he wished to marry sooner. He urged her not to inform her family. Unaware of this pressure on Zahra, the family gave approval.

They lived in a one-bedroom basement flat in Bow. Zahra’s second child, Child B, was born in January 2016. Karan took on parental duties for Child A who called him ‘daddy’. However, signs of unhappiness in the marriage did not take long to emerge. Zahra returned to her family when pregnant and they could tell she was not happy. Karan worked in a restaurant and it was discovered he was sending most of his earnings home to Bangladesh. Karan would visit Zahra’s family home for meals, whereas Zahra was having to pay the household bills from her salary.

Zahra’s family disclosed that Karan did not approve of Zahra’s local upbringing, but he did not physically punish or abuse her. It was emotional abuse in that he was critical of her less-traditional dress, her ‘westernised’ behaviour. He threatened that no-one would marry her for the third time and he would take the children away from her. They separated several times before parting finally in November 2017. From February 2018, Zahra was in a regular relationship with a new partner, about which Karan was said to be “furious”, and she wanted to divorce Karan, which he refused to do.

Karan said he was living with his sister in Croydon but it is now known that he had rented a flat close to where Zahra lived, sharing a room with a male friend. Karan was allowed weekly access to Child B at Zahra’s mother’s home. He had the keys to both this home and Zahra’s flat. He was caught “rummaging around” on one occasion and, in February 2018 the family changed the locks because they suspected him of covert entry and he refused to return the keys. This issue was a significant line of enquiry for the Panel but it proved not possible to ascertain a reason for the absence of a record of her request and to whom it was made.

This prompted Zahra to ask for the return of her flat keys when they separated which Karan also refused. She persisted and he eventually returned his set of keys to the flat. He must have made and retained a copy because he covertly gained access to the flat to perpetrate Zahra’s homicide.

### What was known to safeguarding agencies

Following the birth of Child A, Zahra reported to a breast clinic nurse that Hasan had assaulted her when pregnant. A ‘DV1 Form’ to alert other agencies was not sent to Victim Support as it should have been so there was a missed opportunity for support to Zahra by an Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA). Subsequently, Zahra reported to police that Hasan had slapped her and he was arrested for common assault. Zahra later withdrew that allegation but also separated from Hasan and the NMO was issued.

In April 2015, Zahra took up a permanent tenancy for herself and Child A at a property managed by Clarion, a Registered Provider of Social Housing, and she gave birth to Child B. By September, Zahra had accumulated arrears of rent of about £400 and an agreement was reached that she could reduce the debt by additional monthly payments of £20. In November, she was served with a possession notice but the Housing Management Team (HMT) then agreed to extend her tenancy by six months. This could be a missed opportunity to explore the issue of financial abuse. Karan was recorded as living there in January 2016.

In August 2016, Zahra reported to her GP a low mood, and that she was feeling stressed and frustrated, was getting angry, and was feeling negative with suicide ideation. Domestic violence from her first marriage had continued with the second one. She was prescribed anti-depressant medication and referred to local talking therapy services. Around this time, Zahra was under coercive pressure from Karan to withdraw a letter she wrote to Immigration Services that did not support his visa application. A second coerced letter described a “genuine and subsisting relationship”. The visa was granted in April 2017.

Around this time, Zahra reported to her GP that the prescribed anti-depressants had reduced her libido and her husband had applied pressure to stop taking her medication to restore it. She denied any domestic violence. By August 2017, Zahra had disclosed to a social worker ongoing psychological and emotional domestic abuse for the past six months from Karan who had threatened to take the children from her. She wanted to leave the marriage. She agreed to referral to the Early Help service but, again, the DV1 Form system in place did not operate as it should have done.

Following advice from a family support worker, Zahra also approached Housing Options for advice and assistance due to mental and emotional abuse from Karan. She was signposted to legal advice on having Karan removed from the flat. The Housing Officer emailed a DV1 Form to the Domestic Violence Team but, again, the opportunity was missed to copy to Victim Support to gain IDVA advice. In September, Zahra’s father and uncle attended her home and told her husband to leave the property.

In August 2018, Tower Hamlets CSC conducted an unrelated inquiry regarding Child A and in two home visits, missed the opportunity for a discussion with Zahra about her experience of domestic abuse and no connection was made to her earlier disclosures.

### Weekend of the fatal incident in October 2018

Using the keys he had copied for Zahra’s flat, Karan had been conducting covert surveillance of her lifestyle and he discovered evidence of a relationship with another man. He became disturbed and could not sleep. He visited Child B as usual and said to Zahra that he would agree to a divorce after all, taking pains to establish that she would be at home that night. He then purchased knives, tools and cable ties, entered Zahra’s flat and hid in a cupboard by the kitchen.

After Zahra had put the children to bed, her partner called at the flat but there was no response and she did not answer her telephone. He left and received a text message to return. When he responded that it was too late, he received an expletive message that was out of character and he returned but could not raise a response, so left.

It is likely that Karan had already assaulted and strangled Zahra with a scarf, however, he did not call the police until the morning because he fell asleep after the murder. He advanced a defence of diminished responsibility due to loss of control that was not accepted by the Jury.

**Key issues arising, conclusions and lessons to be learned from the review**

Zahra was twice married and twice subjected to domestic abuse. These marriages were ‘arranged’ in the sense that there were family connections and introductions to both men, but Zahra exercised choice in taking on each relationship, therefore, not ‘forced’ marriages. Hasan’s view of marriage was highly controlling, including physical violence and it soon ended with a divorce.

Karan exerted pressure for a prompt ceremony because of his immigration status and he too was controlling, albeit not physically until the fatal incident. There is clear evidence of financial control whereby he sends his earnings from restaurant work back to Bangaldesh, while Zahra is barely managing and running up rent arrears for the flat. Evidence of his sexual coercion can be gathered from Zahra’s reports to her doctor, for example, being forced to give up anti-depressants to restore her libido.

There is substantive research[[2]](#footnote-2) available that relationship-based homicides are rarely spontaneous and the: ‘He just snapped’ explanation, which suggests an immediate proximal provocation, is not supported. In this specific homicide, Karan’s defence of diminished responsibility due to ‘loss of control’ did not find traction with the Jury. Schlesinger describes ‘catathymic homicides’ as occurring when:

*There is a change in thinking whereby the offender comes to believe that he can resolve his inner conflict by committing an act of extreme violence against someone to whom he feels emotionally bonded*

Karan had spent almost a year stalking and surveilling Zahra to the final weekend when he found the evidence of her sexual relationship that probably created the ‘tipping point’ that determined the finale to his particular journey to homicide, including a specific shopping trip to acquire the tools he needed for the job.

Overall, it is felt that while any one of the missed opportunities, had they been taken, could have contributed to a different outcome for Zahra, there is no particular failure in service identified. Nonetheless, the review has highlighted systemic learning, some of which has already been implemented as the result of this review. For example, the ‘DV1 Form’ approach has been replaced with a single referral pathway for all DA coming to notice forwarded direct to the IDVA service.

Additional strategic learning points have been identified by the Panel to form the basis of an Action Plan:

1. Domestic Abuse awareness (including the wider definition of coercion and control) and training for front-line staff should be made mandatory
2. The concept of family group conferences should be promoted across agencies
3. Registered Providers of Social Housing should be required to respond to rent arrears as a possible indicator of financial abuse and improve awareness of the support available, furthermore, to be more alert to examples of controlling behaviour, such as in this case the potential DA risk following a request for a lock change.

## Recommendations from the review

IMR authors were invited to make recommendations for improvements to their respective internal systems and these have been reviewed by the Panel. The eight recommendations that were for internal system improvement by Tower Hamlets GP Care Group, Children’s Social Care and Housing Options have been set out in appendix 3 to the report and the Panel are satisfied that the recommendations from both reviews have and will be implemented as shown. There were no recommendations arising from the MPS or GP Surgery IMRs.

IMR authors were also invited to make wider recommendations for Panel consideration and those made by Tower Hamlets GP Care Group and Tower Hamlets CSC were reviewed and debated by the Panel along with the strategic Learning Points above to identify the following for implementation in an Action Plan set out in appendix 4 of the overview:

1. Review domestic abuse awareness and training for front-line staff (including the wider definition of coercion and control, also its impact on safeguarding children) and devise a programme to ensure it is a mandatory requirement for current and new front-line staff
2. Review training programmes to ensure the concept of family group conferences is promoted across agencies
3. In reference to rent arrears management, Registered Providers of Social Housing should consider developing their pre-action protocols and/or affordability assessments to help identify and address possible indicators of financial/domestic abuse and improve awareness of the support available.

W Griffiths CBE BEM QPM

Chair and Author of the Domestic Homicide Review

18 February 2021

1. Not her real name and chosen by her family. All other names are also pseudonyms [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Schlesinger 2002, Adams 2007, Monckton Smith 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)