

**LONDON BOROUGH OF NEWHAM
COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP**

**DOMESTIC HOMICIDE REVIEW
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

'ELLIE' AGED 26 YEARS

**FOUND MURDERED IN EAST HAM
IN JULY 2015**

**REVIEW PANEL CHAIR AND AUTHOR
BILL GRIFFITHS CBE BEM QPM
10 JULY 2017**

**London Borough of Newham Community Safety Partnership
DVHR Panel for Ellie, killed in July 2015**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary outlines the process taken by the London Borough of Newham's Community Safety Partnership Domestic Violence Homicide Review Panel established on 23 August 2016 under s9 Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004, independently chaired by Bill Griffiths CBE BEM QPM, to review the death of 'Ellie' a Romanian national aged 26 caused by multiple stab wounds in late July 2015. Her partner 'Vasile' a Romanian national aged 27 appeared at the Central Criminal Court in February 2017, was found guilty of murder and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment.

The process began with a meeting on 20 October 2016 of all agencies that potentially had contact with those involved prior to the death of Ellie. Agencies participating in the review are:

- Metropolitan Police Service
- Newham Clinical Commissioning Group - Woodgrange Medical Centre
- Barts Healthcare NHS Trust - Adult Safeguarding and Open Doors Outreach
- East London NHS Foundation Trust
- nia Ending Violence – specialist domestic abuse advocates
- Newham Domestic and Sexual Violence Team

Agencies were asked to give chronological accounts of their contact with the victim prior to her death. Each agency's report covered the following:

A chronology of interaction with the victim and the perpetrator; what was done or agreed; and whether internal procedures were followed.

The accounts of involvement with this victim cover different periods of time prior to their death. Some of the accounts have more significance than others. The extent to which the key areas have been covered and the format in which they have been presented varies between agencies. Individual Management Reviews were provided by Newham CCG and Barts Healthcare with respect to Ellie that included conclusions and recommendations from the agency's point of view.

When invited to contribute to the Terms of Reference for the review, Ellie's mother was perplexed that Ellie did not report the abuse and violence she was suffering to the police. Knowing what she knows now, she realises that Ellie was afraid of Vasile, his family and the power of their connections both in London and back in Romania. She was content that this concern would be explored through item 10 of the Terms of Reference:

To identify how people in the LB of Newham gain access to advice on domestic abuse whether themselves subject of abuse or known to be happening to a friend, relative or work colleague

Acting on behalf of the family, Ellie's cousin was invited to comment on a draft of this review. She confirmed factual accuracy while providing some additional insights and confirmation that Ellie's 'voice' is reflected in the analysis and conclusions. To Ellie's mother who has lost her only child and to wider family and friends, the Panel offer our heartfelt condolences for this tragic loss.

The process ended when Newham Community Safety Partnership approved a final version of the review report at a meeting on 4 July 2017. Ellie's cousin suggested her pseudonym for this redacted version of the review. Vasile is a random Romanian name for the perpetrator.

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Background information (The Facts)

Ellie is an only child, born and educated in Romania, who lived in the LB of Newham from 2008 where she worked initially as a barista, attended a language course at Newham College and subsequently became involved in prostitution as an 'escort'. She had planned to return to Romania to train as a paramedic.

Vasile is also Romanian and lived in Dagenham from July 2013 and was provided with work in a nightclub run by his sister's partner in Redbridge. They met through friends in July 2014 and set up home together in a first-floor bedroom at a terraced house in East Ham, a multiple occupancy for 10 Romanian nationals with shared bathroom and kitchen facilities.

By August, they had already separated and got back together once and this became a pattern in their relationship. She told her mother that she loved Vasile but that they used to argue and fight a lot and he was jealous. Friends observed that Vasile was controlling and abusive in the relationship. A close friend who was also involved in prostitution saw that Vasile was regularly violent to Ellie by punching, slapping, hair pulling and was verbally abusive, calling her a whore. It is apparent that the perception of Ellie's declared love for Vasile may in fact have been a coping mechanism driven by the ever-present threat and fear of harm.

Ellie attempted to flee the relationship in February 2015 when she visited an old friend from her early time in the UK, now living in Milan. Ellie had few possessions with her as if she had left in a hurry. Vasile followed within days, unannounced as a 'surprise' for Valentine's Day, making it known he had a ring in his pocket. When presented at a nightclub, it was a plastic ring that he had found on the floor. Ellie returned to her friend's home in distress, where Vasile attacked her, bit her cheek and threatened to kill her. Police were called and made a report of the assault but Vasile had run away. There was no reason for the authorities in Italy to pass on the report to the UK police.

Ellie then visited her mother in Romania and the injury was noted by her. She also witnessed an abusive telephone call from Vasile that ordered Ellie to return to London to bring a car key that she had with the threat he would send his friends to beat her and her mother. Ellie returned to live with him again. Vasile subsequently forced Ellie to remove her Milan friend from social media contact.

In April, Ellie's cousin who also lived in Newham noticed that Ellie had a large bruise on her upper arm. When questioned Ellie put it down to the car door accidentally closing on her arm. Looking back, the cousin believes that this explanation for the bruise might be accurate, but that the injury could easily have been inflicted by Vasile slamming the car door on her. Ellie's cousin also observed another side to Vasile when he wept copiously in her presence because Ellie had left him. On another occasion, he begged for money for food and £100 was provided, later repaid by Ellie.

The police investigation into Ellie's homicide retrieved evidence of Vasile's abusive and controlling behavior in June. This was in the form of menacing text messages, probably related to controlling her involvement in prostitution.

Two weeks before the murder, a resident at the same house heard Ellie and Vasile arguing and the next day his wife noticed Ellie with a bruise on her upper right arm. The landlord for the house

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visited and overheard Vasile being controlling and abusive to Ellie. Most of the residents at the house overheard loud arguments between the couple at a frequency of twice a week.

Aside from the report to the police in Milan, however, none of these instances of abuse were reported to anyone in authority by Ellie or anyone who knew about Vasile's escalating pattern of violent and controlling behavior that concluded with extreme violence.

At around noon on the day in late July 2015 that Ellie was killed, a fellow resident heard Ellie crying, followed by raised voices and also singing and laughter. Later, he was in the communal area and witnessed Ellie collecting a suitcase from the basement. Shortly after, Ellie's friend received a call from her asking if she could bring her luggage to stay. Ellie was crying. Vasile could be heard in the background saying: "Are you talking to that bitch again?" When the friend called back, Vasile answered and said that Ellie had taken the car and gone for a drink which the friend considered was strange.

Due to concerns being raised, the landlord for the house visited later that afternoon and discovered Ellie's lifeless body on the floor of the room. She was beyond saving. Her suitcase was packed with her clothes and Vasile had fled the scene, taking Ellie's phone, her identity document and the murder weapon that he threw into a river.

Two voicemail messages were subsequently retrieved from his sister's phone. One contained a clear threat to kill and a slap, to Ellie's evident distress; the other recorded the unmistakable sounds of sexual intercourse [corroborated by forensic DNA material] and Ellie under duress from Vasile to wish death upon her mother. It is not known whether Vasile intended to leave these messages to be retrieved. Either way, it is likely that this was done as prelude to Ellie's murder.

The cause of death was multiple incised wounds to Ellie's chest and neck. There was also evidence of blunt trauma to the head and an attempt at manual strangulation. Toxicology showed an absence of drugs and alcohol in Ellie's body.

Having initially fled to his sister's home, Vasile later returned to the scene and was detained. At Forest Gate police station, he behaved bizarrely to the extent that he was interviewed in his cell. Despite the compelling evidence placed before him Vasile did not provide a coherent account.

Vasile's bizarre behavior continued whilst on remand awaiting trial and his mental health and capacity was assessed by clinical experts. A 'fitness to plead' hearing was held and the trial Judge ruled that he is fit to stand trial. This began in February 2017 with a defence of 'diminished responsibility' due to mental impairment and concluded with a conviction for murder. Vasile was sentenced to life imprisonment with a minimum of 20 years to be served. In sentencing the trial Judge commented: "This truly was a slaughter of an innocent, committed in your narcissistic rage that Ellie was leaving you."

Conclusions from the review

When viewed through the window that has opened on Ellie's life, there is an observable and predictable pattern of escalating domestic abuse, manifest in controlling, coercive, threatening and violent behaviour, inflicted upon her by Vasile that led to her terrible death at the most vulnerable time for her safety: the point where she had decided, for at least the second time, to physically flee the relationship.

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Ellie's involvement in prostitution, that text messaging transcripts have indicated was at least partly controlled by Vasile, also increased her vulnerability to risk. It should be noted that, of the women murdered who are involved in prostitution, some 38% die at the hands of their partner/controller¹.

Ellie had no one to turn to, other than female friends who, it appears, were not themselves aware of what they could do to challenge and confront the abusive relationship with Vasile. When asked: "Why did Ellie or any of her friends not call the police?", her close friend put it in this way: "She loved him too much and none of us would go against her express wish not to inform the police." It is a well-documented survival technique for those in abusive relationships to express love and to implore friends and family not to alert anyone in authority.

One outcome from this review is that, there is no evidence that anyone responsible for safeguarding could view this window on Ellie's life or otherwise knew anything about the abuse in her relationship with Vasile or missed an opportunity for the robust application of professional curiosity. It follows that there is no identifiable root cause of failure on the part of any individual or agency with safeguarding responsibility.

Another is that, from the evidence gathered in this review, all parties that knew anything of the chronic systematic abuse suffered by Ellie at the hands of Vasile in Newham, are Romanian. In addition, there is peripheral evidence that Vasile and, to some extent, his family in the UK, propagated fear of reprisals for talking to the police.

Witnesses spoke of a culture of corruption in their home country and a lack of confidence in the Romanian Police. It is also possible that the Open Doors project experience of Romanian women involved in prostitution reveals a home-grown resistance to being communicated with via leafletting or other tried and tested education methods.

The central challenge identified from this review, therefore, is to create a system of communication between Romanian communities in London and safeguarding agencies that fosters the reporting of domestic and sexual abuse without fear of reprisal. This should embrace clusters of friends, HMO landlords, further education institutions and third party reporting centres as well as safeguarding agencies.

The lack of confidence in the authorities seems inextricably linked to the influence of organised criminal networks (OCN), again strongly associated with Romanian culture. A multi-agency assessment of the Romanian OCN(s) behind prostitution in Newham may identify other avenues to improve the safety of women involved in prostitution.

Recommendations from the review

It is hoped that the learning from this review will contribute in some way to an improved system for safeguarding in Newham. Specific learning identified in the two Individual Management Reviews: *Newham Clinical Commissioning Group*

1. Newham Clinical Commissioning Group to secure funding and lead in the implementation of the IRIS project to support GPs in identifying domestic abuse.

¹ Source: Femicide Census

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2. To continue to raise awareness of domestic abuse with GP practices in the primary care sector.

Barts Health

1. To share the learning from the review with sexual health services
2. To continue to raise awareness of domestic abuse and where to access support throughout the workforce
3. To make available and display information about domestic abuse support services in waiting areas in the hospital sites

In line with LB Newham's combined action plan, version 8, with respect to prior Domestic Homicide Reviews, this Panel recommends, for this review, that both Newham CCG and Barts Health report progress on their internal action plans to the relevant task and finish group of Newham Community Safety Partnership

Some other actions from the themed areas in the combined action plan are applicable and align with findings from this review. The Newham DHR Task and Finish group are monitoring implementation of these. Therefore, it is recommended that the extant combined action plan is utilised also for the wider findings from this review, with specific additional actions, as follows.

To identify and actively promote all the possible communication channels for women and girls of Romanian heritage who are subject to domestic and sexual violence to secure, without fear of reprisals, their contact with safeguarding agencies and the voluntary sector, to include:

1. Social hubs where Romanian friends meet
2. A family and friends campaign
3. Work with colleges and universities locally to raise awareness and signpost referral pathways to local commissioned services
4. Private landlords and raising awareness of DSV with them
5. Employer DV Policy in local businesses
6. Interpreters good practice checklist

Within this activity, special attention should be paid to raising awareness of the Government definition of Domestic Abuse with emphasis on understanding the nature and form of controlling and coercive behaviour.

While it is not the function of reviews of this nature to be drawn into ongoing operational matters, it is important to acknowledge that, while not specific to this review, there is significant suspicion that Romanian women involved in prostitution in Newham are subject to sinister organised crime elements in the shadows, possibly controlled from Romania. This increases the threat and risk of harm to Romanian women coerced or trafficked into involvement in prostitution, and it is recommended that the Director of the National Crime Agency is added to the distribution list for this review.