

## What happened?

Marie was 33 years old when she was killed by her abuser. He controlled every aspect of her life – her phone, her money, her food, even her use of the bathroom. He made her choose between him and her children. He escorted her to appointments. He effectively starved and imprisoned her over six years.

They were known to 17 separate organisations. Most of them were aware that Marie was a high-risk victim of domestic abuse.

On one occasion, Marie's abuser was arrested and charged with offences against Marie. It appeared however that she was coerced by him to withdraw her statement. He was released from prison with no restraining order and located Marie immediately. He resumed the relationship (Marie had told professionals that she no longer wished to be with him).

Despite this, professionals appeared to blame Marie for the situation in which she found herself. The perpetrator and his behaviour featured little in agencies' records. This meant that he could control and manipulate her, while agencies continued to view her as the problem. He went unchallenged.

Although Marie came from the Irish Traveller community, this was never recorded in any agencies' records. There was little understanding of the additional risks and barriers she faced, and no agency was able to offer her the support she needed to leave. This was because nothing was put in place to disrupt the perpetrator's behaviour or restrict his movement – therefore Marie was never protected from him.

The only time she sought help, there were no police officers available to speak with her immediately – and the opportunity was lost. She never asked (or had the opportunity to ask) for help again.

For a copy of the report contact [domesticabuse\\_admin@sandwell.gov.uk](mailto:domesticabuse_admin@sandwell.gov.uk)

## What did we learn?

Professionals often blame victims for the behaviour of their abuser – rather than challenging the perpetrator.

Professionals should always record ethnic origin, so they can consider any additional barriers and difficulties victims face.

Professionals need to question, triangulate and corroborate information in order to disrupt the behaviour of perpetrators.

All available civil and legal remedies should be considered in order to protect victims.

Non-engagement by domestic abuse victims should always be seen in the context of coercive control by the perpetrator.

Professionals need to understand that separating from a perpetrator is a very dangerous time. 89% of domestic femicides occur within the first year after separating.

## What can we do now?

**Agencies should take active steps to ensure that their practitioners are confident, competent and fully equipped to:**

- **Understand how attitudes of professionals can undermine a victim's ability to escape domestic abuse**
- **Recognise the specific barriers facing domestic abuse victims from the Irish Traveller community**
- **Recognise and avoid victim-blaming - acknowledge that victims are not responsible for the abuse they are experiencing and recognise that all victims need a trauma-informed response**
- **Recognise the particular needs of 'minoritised' victims and the barriers they can experience in accessing appropriate support**
- **Identify the local pathways that are in place for victims to access services**
- **Appreciate how perpetrators can use drugs as a mechanism to control victims**
- **Use the available civil and legal remedies to protect victims**

## DHR report recommendations

1. Sandwell Community Safety Partnership should write to the Women's Aid Federation (enclosing a copy of the final report) to ask them to consider strengthening the Women's Aid Quality Standards concerning evictions from refuges. This should ensure that when a woman is evicted from a refuge, she will still have an exit plan tailored to her individual need and access to ongoing appropriate support. In addition, she should be provided with information on how she can make a complaint or challenge the decision to evict her.
2. Sandwell Community Safety Partnership should request further detailed information about the training on domestic abuse that is currently provided to staff working in the West Midlands National Probation Service, West Midlands Police, the Crown Prosecution Service, HM Courts Service and the Judiciary.
3. Sandwell & West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group to sustain funding for Sandwell IRIS domestic abuse intervention until 2022 and beyond, to maintain the current level of 96% uptake by Sandwell GPs.
4. This domestic homicide review should be used as a case study for domestic abuse training (and other training e.g. substance misuse training).
5. When considering safety planning for victims and children, the West Midlands MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment conference) processes should clearly consider the need for relevant partner agencies to seek to make applications for restraining orders/injunctions/domestic violence protection orders as appropriate. The Chair of the conference and wider attendance should be clear where the responsibility lies for each order, and the thresholds for application.
6. Crown Prosecution Service should consider strengthening its guidance in cases where victims object to the making of an order. The guidance should include the need for a prosecutor to consider the principles arising from the case law, namely the need to balance respect for the wishes of the victim and her right to autonomous decisions about her life, with consideration of whether she is in fear, has been coerced, or does not have capacity to make the objection.
7. A judge making a decision on whether to grant or decline a restraining order where the victim objects to the making of the order should hear oral evidence from the victim in order to explore whether she is in fear, has been coerced, or does not have capacity to make the objection.