

Executive Summary

Offensive Weapon Homicide Review Harrow 001

Introduction

This review relates to the fatal stabbing of Michael (not his real name), which took place in the early hours of the morning in July 2023. A group of 6 males had been at an address in Barnet, with 2 females. The males left the address in the late evening. A short while later the group were in the same area of Harrow, which Michael was frequenting. Michael was in his car when one of the males approached the vehicle. An altercation took place and Michael received a single stab wound to his chest which we subsequently died from.

The homicide is a qualifying homicide for an Offensive Weapon Homicide Review due to the fact that Michael was 19 years of age when he was fatally stabbed. The identified perpetrator was found not guilty of the fatal stabbing of Michael. However, for the purposes of an Offensive Homicide Review, a person has to have been identified even if they have not been convicted of the offence.

The weapon was identified by the Pathologists report as a double-bladed knife or small machete. The weapon has not been recovered.

In accordance with Section 24(6) of the Police Crime Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, Harrow Community Safety Partnership in September, agreed that the criteria for an Offensive Weapon Homicide Review was met and appointed an Independent Chair, to carry out a review.

The time period that this review covers is late 2019 – July 2023, the start date being when Michael began coming to the attention of partner agencies.

Words from Michael's family

The following words have been provided by Michael's sister, as part of a longer message written during the trial of the perpetrator in July 2024. The entire message is included in the full report.

"Everyday, since xx July, his face (Michael) on the news, I wake up with only memories left of him. Every day I wake up hoping miraculously he would be in the room next to me. Every day it hits me that it's not possible. Not today, not tomorrow, not in 10 years' time. He was smart with lots of potential for his future that you have taken away. My brother was like my best friend, my father figure and my protector all in one.

Every day I wish I could go back and have one last day with Michael. Every day I wish I didn't take the moments in our childhood for granted. Unfortunately, no one can bring my brother back ever but I've made my wish in life to live for him make him proud and serve him justice."

Key lines of Enquiry (KLOE)

As part of the revie process a number of Key Lines of Enquiry were agreed.

KLOE 1 - What are the background contextual factors that brought the 6 members of the group together who were at the scene of the homicide. Consideration should be given to females connected to the group at the time leading up to the homicide incident. (Contextual factors are the risk and protective elements that exist for a person, as an individual, in relation to their family, their peers, their school/education and the wider community).

KLOE 2 - Are there dynamics in relation to culture and/or Identity that create interrelationships or conflict between individuals or groups in the area?

KLOE 3 - Does status and respect feature in the dynamics within and between those involved in, or associated to, the victim or perpetrator?

KLOE 4 - Do geographical boundaries impact on the operational structures, sharing of information, or resources that could assess risks of violence and vulnerabilities associated with personal or group conflict who travel across local authority boundaries?

This Executive Summary sets out the key learning points they have emerged through the review process and the Recommendations to both National Government and local partner agencies.

Key Learning

The following section sets out the key learning for each of the above Key Lines of Enquiry.

KLOE1 - There are no clear contextual factors that brought the members of the group together. Indeed, the evidence indicates that the key link between the group was the flat, which was, for all intent and purposes, a free house, as described by the Senior Investigating Officer. It is noted that as part of their investigations following the death of Michael, Police recovered two knives from the premises. There are clear safeguarding issues in relation to the occupant and those frequenting the address.

The key partnership learning is to explore the opportunities of greater engagement with Registered Housing Providers on key interventions of programmes that help to address local priorities, including serious violent crime and anti-social behaviour. This should include multi-agency programmes to tackle anti-social behaviour or organised criminality in local areas, such as the Council led Multi Agency Risk Management conferences and other local partnership governance arrangements.

KLOE 2 - The 6 individuals who were at the scene when Michael was fatally stabbed, come from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. In fact, based on the evidence provided, this was not a formed group per se, and certainly not a group that could be described as having conflict between other groups in the area.

There are no cultural or identity connections that can be drawn from the dynamics of the individuals who are loosely associated and not a formed, or defined, group.

As a result, there was no identified learning.

KLOE3 - Focusing on the group of 6 males who were at the scene of the fatal stabbing, there is supporting evidence that at least one of the group was developing a growing notoriety where respect and status, personally and across his peer group, would have been a determining factor.

Whilst it would be difficult to identify how this risk could have been assessed within this group by partnership agencies, it would be valuable for both Barnet and Harrow Community Safety Partnerships and Child and Adult Safeguarding Partnerships, to review their risk assessment processes to see whether Identity, Status and Respect, are defined risk factors, within their contextual safeguarding processes.

KLOE4 – There is evidence that there is a good dialogue and sharing of information across partner agencies in both Barnet and Harrow. However, it is evident that partner agencies, involved with Michael since 2020 to the time of his death, did not assess risk in the same way and there were differences of opinion of the risk posed to and from Michael.

Contextual Risk Assessment is a process that looks at the risk and protective factor for a person in terms of them as an individual, within their family, their peer group, school or education, environment and wider community. The review includes a table of the risk factors related to Michael and clearly highlights how the accumulation of risks and traumatic incidents, impacted on him, has decision making.

The Review clearly highlights that there are very differing views of contextual risks, based on the perspective of each partner agency. As a result, assessments were not consistent with the actual risks posed and did not always consider all of the factors of the agencies that had been, or were engaged with Michael, his family or peer group.

It is also evident for both Michael and some members of the group at the scene of his fatal stabbing that Identity, Status and Respect were key factors in their backgrounds. Identity, Status and Respect are well documented contextual considerations, as highlighted in Learning Point 3 above, this does not appear to feature in any of the risk assessment processes provided.

It should also be highlighted that Identity and Trauma should also be considered within the contextual considerations, particularly where the cultural experiences of the child differ from the experiences of their family or guardian.

In summary, agencies did not fully recognise the cumulative risks that were impacting on Michael's decision making. As a result, non-engagement, which was a constant theme across agencies interaction, was seen as a reason to close down engagement rather than as an accumulation of the risks affecting Michael.

Based on the evidence gathered, Michael was not "hidden" to services, rather the agencies who were given responsibility to provide support, or an intervention, did not find ways to engage with him.

During the interview process Michael's family highlighted their concerns that partner agencies did not perceive the same level of risk that they saw between early 2020 and the Summer of 2023. They expressed their concerns that there was discrimination by agencies, due to their Romanian Heritage.

The view of family, close relatives, or guardians and the individual should be a fundamental part of any risk assessment process. Harrow Children's Partnership and Adults Safeguarding Board should consider how the views of the individual, parents, relatives or guardians can be obtained. The aim of this approach is to better inform the contextual safeguarding risk assessment considerations, including Culture and Identity, so they reflect the full extent of risk, through the eyes of both professionals and those closest to the person at risk.

The term Adultification relates to a child's personal characteristics, socio-economic influences and/or lived experiences. Regardless of the context in which adultification takes place, the impact results in children's rights being either diminished or not upheld. This results in adultification bias which is contrary to child safeguarding legislation and guidance.

The evidence clearly indicates that agencies engaged with Michael, did not apply the notions of innocence and vulnerability. When Michael did engage with agencies between the ages of 16 and prior to him turning 18, the vulnerabilities were evident, such as leaving home, living with older people, renting accommodation in Kent or taking low paid work. However, agencies treated these "choices" as if they were being taken by an adult, rather than a child.

One of the most troubling elements of this case relates to how service provision fundamentally changed for Michael once he became 18 years of age. Key learning from this review and supporting academic research, highlights the importance for National Government to review the different definitions of child, young person, adolescent and young adult to better align in how vulnerability is considered. The aim of the review is to reduce the current cliff edge of support that exists at the age of 18, where services are reduced, or withdrawn, based only on age.

Although a range of interventions and support was put in place for Michael, the manner in which he was approached was not consistent with his risk factors or lifestyle. Face to Face contact was not a regular feature of engagement. Although the interventions were aimed at meeting the needs as assessed by professionals; drug and alcohol support, accommodation advice, mentoring, employment support; there does not appear to be a level of consistency that better engaged Michael. As a result, Michael's risks did not diminish.

Summary of key Recommendations

The following section sets out the key National and partnership recommendations based on the evidence gathering and key learning points from the review.

National Recommendations

Recommendation 1 - For the Government led by the Department of Education to review, amend and formally adopt the following definitions and age ranges for the terminology of a Child, a "Young Person", an "Adolescent"

- Child – a person up to the age of 18.
- Adolescent – a person between the age ranges of 10-19.
- Young Person – a person between the ages of 10-25.

Recommendation 2 - It is recommended that a clear definition of a young adult, being 18-25 years of age is formally adopted across government departments, as set out in the Parole Board report Young Adults Member Guidance.

Recommendation 3 – That relevant Central Government Departments, led by the Department for Education, urgently reviews the safeguarding responsibilities of partner agencies for a young adult between the ages of 18-24, where there are recognised latent vulnerabilities, to ensure they receive the same level of support and protection as if they were under the age of 18.

This will ensure that the level of support is not diminished due to an age-based “cliff age”, which is so evident in this case.

Partnership Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Engagement with Social Housing Providers - Barnet Council, Barnet Homes and community safety leads, should review how they formally engage with Registered Housing Providers on local issues such as crime and anti-social behaviour, long term enforcement or regeneration programmes. The aim to is to maximise the opportunities to improve the flow of information and intelligence and, where appropriate, share resources. This should also be a consideration for Harrow Council and the Metropolitan Police Service Command area, covering Harrow and Barnet.

Recommendation 2 – Status, Respect and Identity – The cross borough daily Violence and Vulnerability meeting, Child and Adult Safeguarding Partnerships and multi-agency risk meetings, should review their risk assessment processes to ensure that Status, Respect and Identity, including cultural identity, are defined risk factors within their contextual safeguarding processes. Status, Respect and Identity should feature within the contextual considerations and be included in both the process and training on contextual safeguarding.

Recommendation 3 - Partnership review of Contextual Safeguarding Risk assessment processes- For partner agencies, children and adult safeguarding leads, to review the current contextual safeguarding risk assessment processes, carried out by the Child in Need Assessment, Multi Agency Safeguarding Panels, Youth Justice and Probation Panels, Violence Vulnerability and Exploitation daily meetings, the Exploitation Risk Assessment Form and with externally commissioned agencies, The aim of the review should be to improve the consistency of approach of assessing the contextual risk including the cumulative risk. This should include risks pre and post the age of 18 years.

Recommendation 4 – Introduction of dynamic risk assessment tool – Both Harrow and Barnet Community Safety Partnerships should explore best practice in simple risk assessment processes which can be applied universally in any violence and vulnerability forums.

Recommendation 5 - Greater involvement of the individual and family voice as part of the formal risk assessment process - Harrow Children’s and Adults Safeguarding Partnerships should consider how the views of parents can be obtained to better inform the contextual safeguarding risk factors, so they fully reflect the full extent of risk through the eyes of both professionals and those closest to the person at risk person. This should include strengthening the existing multi-agency, restorative practice approach (see below), recognising of the cultural

challenges that certain migrant communities face when interacting with government agencies and the criminal justice system. Developing such an approach will benefit other Children and Adults Safeguarding Partnerships, pan London and Nationally.

Restorative Practice includes a range activities used to engage those affected by harm and conflict to communicate effectively about the impact of behaviour, explore relationships and mutually agree the steps that need to be taken to acknowledge and where possible repair the harm that has been caused.

Recommendation 6 – Partnership training – Harrow Community Safety Partnership, Safeguarding Adults Board and Children’s Partnership leads should work together to develop a training programme on: -

- Adultification,
- The use of language, specifically victim blaming language in reports and risk management processes,
- The relevance of Status, Respect, Identity, including Cultural Identity, in the risk assessment process and in engaging with individuals and families, from ethnic and culturally diverse backgrounds and communities.

The training should be multi partnership and include voluntary and community agencies who are commissioned to deliver interventions. Consideration should be taken on the benefits of expanding this to cover partner agencies across the Northwest Borough Command Unit.

Recommendation 7 – Quality Assurance and learning of Risk Assessments – Police, Probation Service, Children and Adults Safeguarding, community safety professionals and commissioned partner agencies should consider developing a Multi Partnership Quality Assurance Process for Risk Assessments. Senior Managers or Supervisors across key partners should be trained on the process, with the aim of achieving greater consistency of assessment.

Recommendation 8 – Introduction of a post 18 provision – Harrow Community Safety Partnership and Harrow Adults Safeguarding Board to work together to establish a multi-agency panel that captures and supports vulnerable young people transitioning to adulthood (18-24-year-olds). The panel is to consider cases of young adults who remained at high risk of contextual harm including a clear understanding of the importance of Identity and Culture. The panel should aim to deliver interventions that support young adults, practically, emotionally and socially to reduce their risk and make positive choices by providing 1-2-1 advocacy support. Michael’s family have specifically highlighted this recommendation as a crucial improvement that would support them in their determination to “*make him proud and serve him justice*”.

Recommendation 9 – Defining support and interventions, including advocacy - Harrow Community Safety Partner agencies should use the findings of the review to look at the range of interventions for those identified as being at risk to exploitation and/or group conflict, and redefine meaningful engagement. to focus on Face-to-Face contacts with vulnerable young people and young adults. This should include clear evidence that the intervention includes engagement in activities which progress the person’s movement away from exploitation, or group conflict.

In addition, the partnership should review external 121 support and consider developing Serious Violence Independent Advocates to improve better outcomes for vulnerable individuals or their parents/guardians. The decision on how and when the advocacy role is applied should align with the contextual safeguarding risk assessment process as set out in the above Recommendations.

Recommendation 10 – Harrow Enforcement Policy and on-line Test Purchases

Brent & Harrow Trading Standards to update the current Enforcement Policy so that it clearly covers both local authorities and includes a section which focuses on age restricted sales and on-line Test Purchases.

Recommendation 11 – Metropolitan Police Service

It is recommended that the Metropolitan Police Service Lead Responsible Officer for violence against the person considers effecting a change to the current MPS violence against the person investigation policy to include extended mandatory intelligence checks in offensive weapon related criminal investigations.

This is already subject to a recommendation made by another Offensive Weapon Homicide Review.

Recommendation 12 – Probation Service

To use learning and development opportunities to improve practitioner's ability to be professionally curious and thinking in a more trauma informed way when conducting risk assessments.

Recommendation 13 – General Practice Surgery

To hold regular Safeguarding Adults meetings focused on regular no attendance cases, or where partnership Risk Assessments have been received. The aim is to ensure these have been acted upon and any communication or contact is appropriate for the patient, based on both their contextual risks and cultural background.